

Writing Lives, Writing Loss: An autoethnography on the death of a teammate

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Dedication

In Memory of Taylor Ward



Abstract

This project began as a memorial to an athlete who died of cancer, and ended as a journey through grief. The focus of my research is to explore through an autoethnography of loss, how the death of a young athlete is experienced and how as an athlete, I make sense of loss outside of sport. Visiting and revisiting spaces of loss and grief in sport allowed me to explore more deeply my personal histories as fragmented stories of grief. Through autoethnography and meta-autoethnography, this research seeks to uncover the meanings that reside in grieving in sport, examining the language we use to talk about death and loss in a culture of grief shrouded with stories of heroics and feel-good narratives. As I continue on my grief journey, I negotiate and re-negotiate the meanings I have constructed in my experiences. I will continue to do that as I venture through life and navigate the texts, searching to find balance between writing lives and writing loss.

Keywords: autoethnography, death, loss, sport, grief

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Chapter One: Introduction

I played varsity rugby throughout my undergraduate program at Brock University, and at the end of my second year, teammate, Taylor Ward, was diagnosed with leukemia, after weeks of playing with what we all assumed, doctors included, was a chest cold. The next eleven months passed us by and we received the news that Taylor had passed. Our assistant coach, Legs, was first to receive the news. Her phone rang and it was Michelle calling, Taylor's mother, and Michelle called Legs once or twice a week, so we didn't think anything of it. Legs was gone for what felt like ten minutes but was probably only five. Michelle was so collected when she told Legs, and I remember Legs walking back into the room we were all in and all of a sudden, teammate, Lex says, "It's happening." There were muffled, "No, no, no. It's fine." When Lex started to cry, Legs told us to pick up our stuff and head outside. I'll never forget Legs breaking down and saying, "How do you tell thirty-five girls that their fucking friend just passed?"

When Taylor was first diagnosed, the team decided to sell t-shirts and "RUCK CANCER" bracelets. We had TW patches sewn onto our jerseys and TW stickers to display anywhere we wanted. Taylor came to visit us back at Brock any chance she got, if she was feeling up to it. By mid-August 2013, Taylor was in remission. Because chemotherapy was getting too hard on her body, they decided a bone marrow transplant would be best to rid her of the cancer. Her bone marrow transplant went well, until her body rejected it and she passed away on September 7, 2013.

This project began as a memorial to an athlete who died of cancer and ended as a journey through grief. The focus of my research is to explore through an autoethnography of loss, how the death of a young athlete is experienced and how as an athlete, I make

sense of loss outside of sport. It traces and works out how this loss is felt as an individual and as a member of a team by examining how the sporting world gives you a place to grieve, and how the loss of a teammate is ignored. Visiting and revisiting spaces of loss and grief in sport allowed me to explore more deeply my personal histories as fragmented stories of grief. Through autoethnography and meta-autoethnography, this research seeks to uncover the meanings that reside in grieving in sport, examining the language we use to talk about death and loss in a culture of grief shrouded with stories of heroics and feel-good narratives.

How Did I Get Here?

The following is a journal entry excerpt from September 2015, the beginning of my masters thesis, that explores my journey to unpack and revisit loss through a resistant culture of grief, flooded with heroic and redemptive narratives.

I am a loser and when I lose, I am a sore loser - except for when my losses are not recorded on a game sheet. The real losses. The ones I cannot get back. To this day, I have lost 3 grandparents, a step-parent, a sister and I have buried more friends than birthdays I have celebrated. I'm lost between two worlds – reality and my athletic escape. But what happens when those worlds collide? Tragedy. I can lose graciously (maybe a better word is respectfully) on the field. I can lose off the field with a head held high. When those worlds collide, I'm floating in a dark, dark, space.

Sporting world, interrupted.

Team sports have played a pivotal role in my life. While battling teen angst, mental health issues and a sexual orientation crisis, I found rugby. I'm not one for clichés, or maybe I am, but rugby didn't save me. My teammates did. I shared with my rugby teammates more than I have ever shared with anyone. After the first (of many) suicide attempts, I was released from the hospital and I collapsed into the arms of a teammate. We haven't talked about it to this day, and that's what we both needed. After spending a week with a lesbian roommate/teammate, I realized that lesbians weren't unicorns – the mythological beings that everyone talked about but nobody had ever met. And I realized I had been a unicorn my whole life. I was reintroduced to myself, and I thank my rugby teammates for that.

My rugby teammates have given me the strength to overcome obstacles I saw as mountains, and they pulled me out of the trenches of depression. It is toilsome to try to combine the twenty six letters of the English alphabet to full encapsulate the meaning, and positive transformative role my teammates have had in my life, leaving me with many questions – *why did I have to lose a teammate to cancer? Why do I feel so disconnected from my team? Why do I feel like I am no longer a rugby player? Why did my worlds have to collide at the expense of a teammate?* I believe so strongly that there are only a finite amount of terrible things that

can happen in this world, and if something bad is happening to me, I'm saving someone else. So why then did I - we - lose a friend, an athlete, a teammate?

All of these questions and more have led me down a labyrinth of self-reflection. Who am I to tell the story that so many athletes have suffered from? I feel strongly about autoethnography as a compelling qualitative research method because with autoethnography, I can finally write about my experiences and not view it as wasteful, because finally, my personal experiences and my academic avenues are aligned.

Taking on Autoethnography

There is a significant gap in the research literature on the experiences of athletes who suffer a tragedy in a team setting. While there is literature on the death of a teammate, it is framed through a sport psychology lens and the research is quantitative (see Vernacchia, Reardon, & Templin, 1997; McNeil, Silliman, & Swihart, 1991). In addition, much of this existing research is several decades old. The experience of loss and the experience of grief is often overlooked when examined through a lens of performance rooted in sport psychology, injury and retirement (see Collinson, 2003, 2005; Humberstone, 2011; Lindemann, 2009; Scarfe & Marlow, 2015). When we ignore the meaning of experiences of loss in team contexts, we lose the athletes' perspectives on grief in sport. I argue that there is more to explore in the classic underdog story of redemption; the stories about the teams who suffer immensely but rally together in dedication to the

memory of the fallen athlete. There is far more. There are stories to tell that have the potential to impact and challenge prevailing perspectives of grief in sport through analysis of autoethnographic self-reflection.

Autoethnography is a powerful tool as it draws from personal experiences that inform us of the lived realities of individuals. The social reality of athlete deaths in team settings is experienced differently by each individual on the team, and by unpacking the experiences of the individual; the reality of the loss for all can be better understood. This research may have implications for understanding grief processes in athletic and team contexts. By positioning myself as both narrator, and main character of this story, I am able to offer a space for dialogue for others who have or will share similar experiences as me.

Telling Taylor's Tale

The birth of this research is the result of the 2013 death of a Brock University women's rugby teammate. A short eleven-month diagnosis with leukemia took away our leading point scorer, our friend, and our teammate. The team hasn't been the same. I have felt the world stop spinning. I watched a team come together and fall apart more times in an eight-week season than I could count on my hands. Parallel to my losses off the field, I moved on. This loss was different though. As a graduating player, and one of only three players who had the honour of playing with the late Taylor Ward to remain on the roster of the Brock University's women's rugby team, I feel compelled to tell this story. After her death, we were outfitted with TW patches sewn to the left sleeve of our jerseys. Was that enough? Would players in the following years know what it means to wear that jersey and to see that TW patch? What will it mean to them, if anything?

The implications of this research reach far beyond the field. For years, I have collected and carried emotional baggage from the deaths of friends and family close to me – the weight of my personal history. It’s funny to say, isn’t it? It feels like I have been piggy-backing memories for twenty-five years. As I grow, so does the emotional weight I carry with me. It’s as if my emotional baggage has personified. I used to hate it. I wanted to shred every bit of my past because it’s gone and I should no longer be burdened with the weight I carry. As I’ve grown, I’ve realized that the weight of the emotional baggage I carry is heavy only when I am present, on Earth because of gravity. As I’ve explored further into the depths of my personal history, my personified emotional baggage becomes recognizable. I carry with me the grief of losing a teammate to cancer. Sometimes I can feel my bones straining under the weight of the life Taylor never lived. I’ve heard that it’s necessary to let things go, simply because they are heavy. I’ve carried the weight of a teammate for years. For some, the weight of their emotional baggage is enough for them to settle (un)comfortably in a nice white room with four walls and no windows and only one way out – unpacking that baggage.

I wanted to do something with my loss and my grief. I wanted to understand why the grief I felt over a teammate was suffocating me, but not like losing a step-parent, sibling or childhood friend. I wanted to know why the act of naming Taylor’s chest cold to a diagnosis of leukemia was so powerful. It’s time to unpack.

I was a student-athlete and as such, I was a peer and teammate. To understand and reflect on my personal experiences as an athlete who lost a teammate, I am able to offer an opening to conversation for other athletes who might one day experience a similar loss. As a student, I often find that my voice is lost in academic papers. Understanding

that I can contribute substantially to the academic world and tell the stories of my experiences in research is liberating. Through a critical analysis of my experiences, I am able to reflect on how my experience of loss has shaped my vision of the world I experience, as both a teammate and a researcher.

Outline of Chapters

The second chapter of this thesis is a review of literature. The literature review identifies major themes and exposes the gaps in knowledge. I discuss autoethnographic accounts of loss, specifically, autoethnographies of illness, trauma and end-of-life narratives, as narratives of loss are powerful tools for understanding our experiences of death, tragedy, trauma and illness. I discuss autoethnography as a research approach and examine the new directions for autoethnography in critical sport studies.

In the third chapter, I examine and outline the methods and methodologies used in telling this autoethnographic research story. Within this, I highlight autoethnographic approaches by Carolyn Ellis, Arthur Bochner, Laurel Richardson, Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln. Then primarily drawing from the work of Carolyn Ellis, I unpack and explore the key tenets of autoethnographic research and methodologies. I explain the role of autoethnography in my own work by implementing the use of journals, and self-reflective writing pieces.

Throughout the fourth chapter, using autoethnography as my primary method, this autoethnographic research story is presented as a personal narrative across fractured and nonlinear time spans from 2012 to 2017. As a grieving

teammate, I visit and re-visit my experiences with grief in a sporting context. The grief I experience is personified and speaks throughout the chapter, opening spaces for articulating grief as I struggled with this experience.

Lastly, I draw out the challenges I face in situating myself throughout the text, between past and present selves, between grief and a grieving teammate. I discuss through meta-autoethnography my fragmented experiences with grief and how this autoethnographic exploration has reopened wounds. I explore the experiences and perspectives of a student-athlete asking the question, “What happens on the field when a teammate dies?” I enter into conversations with myself that challenge me to interpret and reinterpret my understanding of my identity and life experiences as an athlete immersed into a culture of grief dominated by heroic and underdog narratives.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter will provide an overview of autobiographical literature, specifically, autoethnographies of illness, trauma and end-of-life narratives. Carolyn Ellis describes autoethnography as “research, writing, story and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social and political” (2004, p.xix).

Autoethnographic research is usually written in first person, making the author the object of research and is presented as a story with narration, characterization and a plot line (Ellis, 2004). The story serves to disclose the personal and highlight bodily, cognitive, emotional and spiritual experiences. Ellis suggests the goals of this type of research include “evoking emotional experience in readers...giving voice to stories and groups of people traditionally left out of social scientific inquiry...producing writing of high literary/artistic quality...[and] improving readers’, participants’, and authors’ lives” (2004, p.30). Self-reflection and analysis distinguishes autoethnography from other self-narratives such as autobiography, memoirs and personal essays.

Illness, trauma and end-of-life autoethnographies highlight the many concepts that may be experienced during illness and trauma such as awareness of dying, acknowledging death, culture of grief, language of loss and understanding life and death. I discuss autoethnography as a research approach within sport and physical cultural studies. I outline the key tenets and challenges of autoethnography. Lastly, I discuss the new directions in which autoethnography takes in critical sport studies.

Introduction to Autoethnography

The first scholar to use the term “autoethnography” was anthropologist, Karl Heider, in 1975 when he published *What Do People Do? Dani Auto-Ethnography*

(Smith-Sullivan, 2008). Over the last four decades, the term and definition has been modified and cycled through a series of paradigmatic shifts, reflective of the changes in qualitative research. Many scholars in the social sciences have juggled definitions of autoethnography. One of the most recognized books about the topic is *Auto/Ethnography* (1997) edited by Deborah Reed-Danahey (Smith-Sullivan, 2008). Reed-Danahey extends her interpretation of the term:

[A]utoethnography is defined as a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context. It is both a method and a text, as in the case of ethnography. Autoethnography can be done by either an anthropologist who is doing “home” or “native” ethnography or by a non-anthropologist/ethnographer. It can also be done by an autobiographer who places the story of his or her life within a story of the social context in which it occurs. (1997, p. 9)

Autoethnography is employed by scholars working from various paradigms including the postmodern. I acknowledge the strengths of this definition by Reed-Danahey as it can be applied in multidisciplinary fields, across many areas of study. Autoethnography privileges the sociological perspective as postmodern ethnography and postmodern autobiography interfuse. By the late 1990’s, “autoethnography” was the term most preferred by scholars in the field, although there is no universal definition of autoethnography. The single most employed definition of autoethnography originates from *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel About Autoethnography* (Ellis, 2004),

It is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness...Back and forth autoethnographers gaze:

First they look through an ethnographic wide angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations. (p.37)

The Ethnographic I is currently the most comprehensive methodological book devoted exclusively to autoethnography. The book is a methodological textbook about the study of autoethnography, but is written autoethnographically by Ellis. Drawing from this approach, I write autoethnographically about the death of a teammate, as a powerful way to ask research questions surrounding grief and death in sport. By using personal, autobiographical writing as a strategy for academic research, I am able to create a space to talk about loss and contribute to the study of grief, loss and death within sport and physical cultural studies.

Illness, Trauma and End-of-Life Autoethnographies

An enormous body of literature addresses death, however, as Richardson (2003) noted social science consideration of death frequently approaches the subject as belonging to an “other.” The “othering” of death distances our experiences of and about death. Autoethnography is a popular method for narrating loss, though not all autoethnographies are loss narratives. The telling of evocative stories that are valued highly through interpretation over the presentation of fact is a powerful medium to explore illness, trauma and end-of-life experiences. As a research method, autoethnography acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than the assumption that research must be conducted from a neutral, impersonal and objective stance. Ellis (2006) states,

Autoethnography shows struggle, passion, embodied life, and the collaborative creation of sense-making in situations in which people have to cope with dire circumstances and loss of meaning. Autoethnography wants the reader to care, to feel, to empathize, and to do something, to act. It needs the researcher to be vulnerable and intimate. Intimacy is a way of being, a mode of caring, and it shouldn't be used as a vehicle to produce distanced theorizing. (p. 433)

Ellis is a pioneer in the field of autoethnography and has published extensively. Her *On The Demands of Truthfulness in Writing Personal Loss Narratives* (1996) and *Final Negotiations: A Story of Love, Loss and Chronic Illness* (2010) are considered key contributions in the field of autoethnography. She has written extensively on illness and related topics (1995b, 1997, 1998, 2002, 2004) including abortion (1992), minor bodily stigmas (2000a), caretaking an ill parent (1996a), and caretaking a terminally ill spouse (1995a). The work of Ellis is inclusive of many phenomena experienced during times of illness and trauma such as awareness of dying, acknowledging death, culture of grief, language of loss and understanding life and death. Ellis explains her autoethnographic approach stating, "I start with my personal life and pay attention to my physical feelings, thoughts and emotions" (2004, p. xvii). Ellis and Arthur Bochner (2006), a scholar who also writes extensively on autoethnography, ask: Why does the story matter? They suggest social science methods and autoethnography in particular can help us make sense of illness, trauma and dying. Over time, death has been acknowledged and accepted as part of the life cycle, so why does our culture work so diligently to treat death as an obstacle to overcome, not as something to embrace when the time comes (Giorgio, 2014).

Autoethnographic writing captures the essence of lived experience in many ways. In capturing the essence of lived experience, autoethnography presents itself in many forms. Many examples of autoethnographic literature are creative products, designed to present a natural departure from traditional academic writing (Chang, 2008). This vulnerable self-exposure is a way for authors to connect and speak with the hearts of readers (Ellis 1996, 2004). Analytic-interpretive writing combines a balance of description, analysis and interpretation, which are inextricably intertwined (Chang, 2008). Imaginative-creative writing styles explore not only personal agonies, but further delve into the explanations and interpretations of issues in a creative way (Chang, 2008).

The work of Ellis is predominantly descriptive-realistic writing, although Ellis powerfully captivates readers with her confessional-emotive style. The enormous body of autoethnographic literature on illness, trauma and dying is a blend of descriptive, interpretive, analytic, and confessional evocative writing. These autoethnographies are presented in a variety of ways such as poetry, prose, short stories, fiction, drama, vignettes, reflections and journal entries (see Popovic 2010, 2012a, 2012b, 2013; Bochner 2012; Hollander 2004; Spry 2001, 2011; Denzin 2003).

Writing on Death

Within the body of literature of illness, trauma and dying autoethnographies, “acknowledging death” is a recurring phenomenon. There is a distinct emphasis on and a highlighted significance of acknowledging death within autoethnographic literature on illness, trauma and dying, specifically. I describe acknowledging death as knowing death is close at hand, as opposed to accepting that one day we will die. Nicholas Riggs (2014)

writes about his experience reading the blog of narrative ethnographer, Bud Goodall as he writes at the end-of-life. Riggs (2014) explains the importance of acknowledging death,

The end-of-life is a stage where things play out with no script: improvisational and driven by the possibility of cure on one hand—composed and restrained by diagnosis on the other. The story is somewhere between the *now* of possibility and the *then* of certainty. “Then” of course is the end of the story—an end that, sure enough, *will come*. Death is built into everyone’s story as the ultimate *telos*—the gripping conclusion. Most people fear it. (p. 378)

Riggs’ writing is flooded with questions about what it means to acknowledge death, and how engaging in blogging or other forms of end-of-life dialogue can open a meaningful space to reflect on and write about mortality. In my own experience, I share a few of the questions Riggs (2014) posits about acknowledging death: “How should I feel about the loss of a person I didn’t really know? What am I supposed to do? Are the feelings genuine? Should I be ashamed?” (p.383). Bochner also contributes to the dialogue surrounding the acknowledgement of death. His narrative titled, *Bird on the Wire: Freeing the Father Within Me* (2012) explores his relationship with his estranged father after his father’s sudden death,

Now, in the aftermath of his death, I had to accept the fact that any chance to rise above these circumstances was gone...We would never have a purifying conversation that I could look back on with a sense of resolution and closure. (p.168)

Bochner uses narrative and storytelling to describe his relationship with his father in a way to remake his “self” – a self that can live with the past instead of harbouring against it.

The acknowledgement of death occurs throughout all stages of life, however, acknowledging death at the end-of-life is experienced in a way that reflects, but does not mirror the death of an unborn child. Autoethnography is a compelling method for the telling of perinatal loss. Occupational therapist, Mary Forhan (2010) describes her experience with perinatal loss as her “world was forever changed in ways that [she] could never have imagined” (p.142). Her autoethnography frames her experience through the lens of an occupational therapist and aims to convey the meanings attached to the acknowledgement of death in the context of everyday participation. Maria Lahman (2009) and Marcus Weaver-Hightower (2012) also describe their experiences with the death of children, although they occur at different stages during pregnancy.

Death, though a wound, also becomes sutured into the flow of life. I do not mean this in any sappy sort of “circle of life” way. Death comes and leaves. An indelible tear remains, yes, but death tends to knit easily, some will be disappointed to hear, into the normal fabric of daily events.

(Weaver-Hightower, 2012, p.470)

Lahman writes about her ectopic pregnancy and the loss of her child at 7 weeks. Weaver-Hightower is the bereaved father of a daughter stillborn at 38 weeks. However, both parents experience death and come to know death in ways that rupture their social relations.

Culture of Grief

We experience loss through grief. How we understand and experience grief is socially constructed. The social constructions of grief, what I call the “culture of grief”, includes expectations and behaviours such as not speaking ill of the dead, or comments such as “I know what you’re going through,” “They are in a better place now,” and “How’s your family holding up?” The culture of grief allows for friends, family and strangers to connect and reconnect about the deceased. When a person dies, the culture of grief is embedded with funerals and memorials, which are often religious in nature. The memorial often has a party-like atmosphere, where the living celebrate the life of the dead (Hemmingson, 2009). After the social events, rituals continue such as tending to graves with flowers. Ellis (2003) explains the process of tending graves of family plots with her mother in an autoethnography. She revisits the emotions that are re-experienced in doing so. Ellis is describing the process of tending graves as part of a ritual she shared with her mother despite not wanting to revisit the family plot. Over time, we have established social expectations and nuances about how we grieve and mourn a late loved one. These social expectations and nuances are continued throughout a constructed culture of grief, even if it arouses uncomfortable feelings associated with grief.

It is not an overgeneralization to suggest that everyone grieves differently, but the experience of death is not unique. Everyone at some point in his or her life will experience the loss of a loved one, however, the context surrounding the death is unique. In contrast to the idea that everyone grieves differently, we have established cultural norms in the grieving process. Michael Hemmingson (2009) talks about his experiences

attending the memorial of a friend and former lover, and talks about his resistance to the established norms, rituals and cultural aspects of grief.

No one said anything about her being broken, heartbroken by life, by missed opportunities, unrealized dreams; about spending a decade with a man who could not read or write and refused to work and wound up on the street, and then prison; broken by an endless stream of dead-end, low-paying jobs and crappy cars always failing and dying; broken by waking up with a strange man in bed and not remembering what happened (I was one of those bodies). (pp.7-8)

Hemmingson describes the deceased in his autoethnography as “broken,” a term that he did not use to describe his former lover at the memorial. This resistance is the beginning of the conversation of counter narratives to the culture of grief. I argue that the counter narratives to the culture of grief need to be further explored. How are relationships affected when there is resistance to the established social and cultural norms surrounding grief? When someone dies, a link in a chain is broken. Who repairs that chain, if at all? What other counter narratives to the culture of grief exist? How is the culture of grief explored in a sporting context or in a team setting? Does proximity to the deceased play a role in who is delegated the responsibility to “repair”?

Language of Loss

Embedded in the culture of grief is an inherent “language of loss” – the way we talk about death. I describe the language of loss as a composition of common phrases of good will. The most popular phrases of good will are supportive, non-active, recognize the loss, and are about feelings. Some examples of phrases of good will include, “I am

sorry for your loss,” and “I am here if you need anything.” In general, speaking ill of the dead, attempting to “fix” the loss, rationalizing or explaining loss and minimizing and putting a timeline on loss is less socially accepted. The common ways that we talk about death and loss, I argue, are limiting and problematic. It is understood and accepted that each individual will experience grief differently, but we are hesitant to experience grief outside of the social expectations with which we limit ourselves. There are limited examples of counter narratives on grief because of the challenges and difficulties of writing about loss. We lack a language to discuss loss in its purest form – messy and chaotic. This highlights the challenges of doing autoethnography in this area. Caroline Pearce (2008) is aware of the language she uses in writing about her rupture of self following the death of her mother,

My proximity to the text forced me labour every sentence I wrote and constantly question myself. Had I actually experienced the feelings in the way I described them or was I just performing an identity I thought appropriate and that fulfilled my preconceived notions of what others expected from me? I felt an incredible responsibility to live by the words I wrote else I would be guilty of creating a false biography and of giving false hope. It was then I directly felt the authority words hold and my obligation to act responsibly. I was left to ponder - does one really become the stories one tells? (p.135)

Pearce discusses how the language we use to describe grief becomes entangled with our perceptions of what others are expecting from the grieving. It is through language that we come to know and understand life and death. The language we use in

conversations about loss, trauma and grief are often stories because stories can be told formally and informally to speak about grief in transformative ways. An enormous body of autoethnographic literature addresses questions of grief and death (see Lee, 2006; Hollander, 2004; Giorgio, 2014). In writing about death, the language of loss is an attempt to write the closeness of death into a personal text.

Hollander (2004) writes about the death of her husband from vascular disease, and three weeks later, the death of her mother after a thirty-year bout with multiple sclerosis. In her text, she addresses the difficult question posed to the grieving, “Am I all right?” (p. 201). She acknowledges that she does not know how to respond to the question because she is alive, physically healthy, and in touch with people, but on the other hand, she describes herself as “badly damaged” and may never be “all right” in the way she was once before. Hollander makes sense of her losses by being “in touch” with her sadness and she expresses herself clearly through the haze of loss, trauma and grief. She explains,

How strange this land I have come to is. I may never feel “all right” again, and yet I am absolutely “all right.” I am bereft, but this is where I have to be, because my losses are so great, and because my loves were so deep and they abide with me. (2004, p. 202)

In the months after a loss, the grieving are expected to have “moved on” or continued with life. Hollander is prompted to ask many questions after her neighbour assured her that “life must go on,”

Now why would he say a thing like that to me? Does he think I do not notice that life continues? Does he suggest I mourn too much for the lost love of my life? Does he simply not know what else to say? Or is he

speaking about his own desire to get quit of his discomfort witnessing my pain? ... Please do not suggest to me that you know how I should do this better than I. This is the most intensely personal passage I have yet been through. It took all the strength I had not to roar at my neighbor in response. How dare you, I wanted to say, how dare you suggest to me what to feel or how much to grieve? Do you not see how much this requires of me? How dare you ask one more iota from me? I am “all right.” I am fine. I am heartbroken as I must be. What the hell else could I be? (2004, p. 203)

There is a certain language we use for discussing loss, trauma, death and grief. This language should be carefully examined because the way we talk about loss, trauma, death and grief speaks to how we experience these phenomena. The language we use can provide acceptance of or resistance to the culture of grief we experience. The words we use to attempt to explain our grieving experiences and the concept of grief culture is continually adapting to our personal lived experience, granted that our experiences are unique. Over time, the established social expectations and nuances about how we grieve and mourn a late loved one are embedded in how we acknowledge death and our understanding of dying, the culture of grief and the language we use to explain our experiences in grief.

Autoethnography and Sport

Autoethnography is a relatively new qualitative research method in sport sociology and cultural studies of sport, yet has been taken up by many scholars in the last two decades. The use of stories and narratives in critical sport scholarship are shaped by

autoethnographic methodologies. Many autoethnographies related to sport are about the emotion and embodiment of the sporting experience (see Allen-Collinson, 2003, 2005; Humberstone, 2011; Lindemann, 2009). Richardson (2000) describes writing as a form of inquiry and specifically, evocative writing as a “research practice through which we can investigate how we construct the world, ourselves and others and how standard objectifying practices of social science unnecessarily limit us and social science” (p. 5). The use of autoethnography as an analytical and pedagogical resource has not yet been fully explored. There are many key sources of autoethnographic literature that are underutilized by sport scholars (Sparkes & Stewart, 2015). The use of autoethnographic literature in sport can help us unpack experiences of grief in a sporting or team setting, and other topics in sport that are often ignored.

Jacquelyn Allen-Collinson and John Hockey (2005) write about the ways in which autoethnography can be utilized within critical sport studies and address the criticisms and negative views of the approach. These authors argue that:

[D]espite a growing body of ethnographic studies of particular sports, relatively little analytic attention has been devoted to the actual, concrete practices of doing sporting activity, although a corpus of phenomenologically inspired research on sport and physical activity embodiment has, in recent years, begun to develop. (2005, p. 64)

Allen-Collinson and Hockey suggest that autoethnography can be used as a tool to analyze in depth the ways in which people engage in sport and other leisurely activities as a way to revisit the often ignored mundane social aspects of daily life and sport.

Anderson (2006) rallies for a distinction between analytic and evocative forms of

autoethnography, which can be applied to the different autoethnographic narratives in critical sport studies. In addition, many autoethnographies in critical sport studies primarily address athletic identity through the lens of injury or retirement, focusing on emotions and embodiment (see Allen-Collinson, 2003, 2005; Holt, 2003; Humberstone, 2011; Lindemann, 2009; Mills, 2015).

Existing Autoethnographic Sport Literature

I utilized electronic sources to conduct a literature review search to gather relevant sources. I primarily used SPORTDiscus, Academic Search Premier, and ProQuest databases. Relevant articles were also sent to me via email from my supervisor, Dr. Cathy van Ingen. I began with a wide search framed by two terms “autoethnography” and “death,” which returned an extensive list of sources. I then delimited my search to sport by conducting another search with the terms “autoethnography” and “team,” which highlighted the challenges in dealing with others who were also experiencing the same loss. Almost half of the articles were related to sport in some capacity whether coaching, injury, personal challenges, fan/volunteer experiences and so forth.

To explore further, a third search I conducted contained the words “autoethnography” and “sport,” highlighting topics of autoethnographies including sport, identity, body, narrative, physical education, leisure, masculinity, power, sport psychology, gender, athletes, emotion, embodiment, psychological aspects and so forth. Many of these autoethnographies were based in sport psychology and there were very few results about the lived experience of athletes.

The fourth search I conducted contained the words “team” and “sport” and “death,” returning articles that addressed loss from a sport psychology standpoint, or

addresses the loss of athletic identity through injury or retirement. Vernacchia and Reardon (1997), Fletcher and Meyer (2009), Buchko (2005), Henschen and Heil (1992) were the only articles to address the death of an athlete. However, the studies were quantitative or mixed methods and did not address the lived experience of the teammates of the athletes who had passed away. This leaves a large gap in the existing body of literature to explore how athletes mourn the loss of their teammates.

Death of an Athlete

In this section, I outline the existing literature and their methodological approaches on the death of a teammate, most of which is based in sport psychology literature. Vernacchia and Reardon (1997) examine the case of a male university basketball player who died of a heart attack and describes the emotional stages his teammates and coaches experienced following the incident. Following the death, educational and clinical sport psychologists collaborated to manage and offer care-giving services to team members and coaches using a modified critical incident stress debriefing (CISD) process. The authors describe a stage model of bereavement that can be modified to be a sport-specific tool for sport psychology professionals. Vernacchia and Reardon argue that a sport specific CISD protocol would be extremely helpful for the athletic department staff to follow as they provide services for team members and coaches. Although a stage model will not account for the emotional responses of each individual, it is useful for helping athletes and coaches understand the thoughts, feelings, and physical reactions they are experiencing.

Despite the sport-specific stage model that Vernacchia and Reardon offer, there is no research on the lived experiences of the teammates of a deceased athlete. A stage

model would benefit the sport psychologists and the athletic department in dealing with the bereaved athletes, but arguably does very little for the athletes themselves. McNeil, Silliman, and Swihart (1991) present an exploratory study of grief and coping responses in a rural Midwestern high school eighteen months after the death of a student and star-player on the basketball team. The study collected qualitative and quantitative comparisons of both close and more distant friends of the dead peer. The implications for the study are directed toward individual and school system adjustment. The first half of the study focuses on questions about adolescent responses to a friend's death. McNeil et al. discuss the initial emotional impact of the death of a peer on high school students who preferred to go ahead with scheduled homecoming events, highlighting that the football team "appeared to be fired with unusual determination and aggression" (p. 137) but then the mood became subdued and peers remarked: "I just stood around in a state of numbness" (p.137).

McNeil et al. discuss coping behaviours as either active or passive with active coping behaviours including talking about the loss with others, engaging in physical activity or focusing on memories of their dead friend and attempting to provide a tribute to the deceased. Members in the passive coping behaviours group tended to avoid the feeling component, expressing impatience with those who wanted to talk about it. It is important to note the "owning of tragedy" that is discussed in the article. McNeil et al. describe an instance where the students in the sophomore and senior classes wanted to help plan a memorial honouring the late peer, but the junior class resisted their help, stating that the deceased was "from our class." A major finding from the study was that a

large number of students still carried intense feelings of sadness, anger and confusion eighteen months after the death.

Buchko (2005) presents a study of the implementation of a crisis intervention model following an athlete's suicide from the perspective of sport psychology. The study is a retrospective evaluation of her interventions with a women's basketball team, which experienced the suicide of one of their veteran players. Buchko's research was guided by clinical intuition in helping traumatized athletes and it is hoped that the model presented will aid clinical sport psychologists in times of trauma by providing a template for systematic crisis intervention. This research builds off the work of Vernacchia and Reardon and consists of a three-phase model: Remember, Reorganize and Restore. The first phase, Remember consists of six steps: share the story, validate the emotional impact, evaluate the context of the crisis, protect vulnerable family member(s), negotiate a solvable problem and network with relevant resources. The second phase, Reorganize consists of five steps: formulate a plan for change, identify developmental issues, engage therapeutic tools, assign homework and support systemic rules, roles, and rituals. The last phase, Restore, consists of five steps: track progress toward goals, acknowledge indicators of the time to terminate, address future sources of stress, refer for continuing treatment, and exit the system.

Given that the crisis intervention model is guided by clinical intuition in helping traumatized athletes and it is hoped that the model presented will aid clinical sport psychologists in times of trauma by providing a template for systematic crisis intervention, it is worthy to ask for the athletes' perspectives on the model and its implementation. The study by McNeil et al. concludes that over a year after a tragic

incident, there are still feelings of sadness, and confusion (and I argue that a systematic model for intervention crisis is not beneficial to the athletes).

Teresa Fletcher and Barbara Meyer (2009) published a mixed methods study that examines the effect of participation in a low-element challenge program on the cohesion of a collegiate women's volleyball team in adventure based counseling. During this study, a participant was sent home after having difficulty breathing. Several days after the interventions, the individual died because of a congenital defect. The study doesn't speak to the athlete's lived experiences in losing a teammate suddenly.

New Autoethnographic Directions in Critical Sport Studies

The interdisciplinary nature of self-reflexive research has allowed scholars to explore retro- and introspection within their lived experiences. Autoethnography and other self-reflexive research methods contribute to the ongoing scholarly conversation about the entanglement of life experiences by relating the personal to the academic in a way that guides the readers through the understanding of various phenomena. However, the value of self-reflexive research within scholarly spaces is debated. Many critics consider autoethnographic research to be self-indulgent, narcissistic, and individualized and therefore, less "scientific" or "scholarly" (Wall, 2008). Conversely, scholars who appreciate autoethnography dismiss claims of illegitimacy and suggest that criticisms only "reveal limited foresight into the potential for these texts to expand and challenge current understanding and knowledge" (Popovic, 2013, p.2). Ellis argues, "it's self-absorbed to pretend that you are somehow outside of what you study and not impacted by the same forces as others. It's self-absorbed to mistakenly think that your actions and relationships need no reflexive thought" (p.24).

In order to better understand the various phenomena we experience in our lives, self-reflexive work expresses one's feelings, passions and emotions and invites others into conversations about social problems, trauma, loss, and experiences in the world (Popovic, 2013). In critical sport studies, the usefulness and impactfulness of autoethnography is often overlooked and undervalued by researchers for many reasons. Recently, as a result of the crisis of representation and legitimation in social sciences that ultimately has led to rethinking of traditional research tenets, autobiography and autoethnography have gained credibility as branches of sustained sociological interest. Stanley and Morgan (1993) highlight that sociologists study the production and analysis of 'lives' through the investigation of whole lives and particular life events, however, they suggest sociologists treat autobiographies as social products, requiring greater analytical attention (as cited in Sparkes & Stewart, 2015). Sparkes and Stewart (2015) suggest sporting autobiographies be conceptualized as topics of investigation rather than immediately referential to lives, by analyzing their use of genre conventions, temporal and other structuring, rhetoric and authorial 'voice'. Sporting autobiographies are described as a 'neglected resource,' within the field of critical sport studies, and Thing and Ronglan (2015) state that, "to our knowledge, sociological analyses of sports biographies as texts have hardly been conducted" (as cited in Sparkes & Stewart, 2015, p.1).

Many scholars note that sporting autobiographies tend to follow a structure that highlights an athlete's most memorable plays, chronicles how sport saved the athlete from a negative lifestyle, and tracks their rise to stardom (Sparkes & Stewart, 2015), which further perpetuates a redemptive sport narrative. Bale, Christensen, and Pfister

(2004), Overman (2003), Pipkin (2008), and Whannel (2002) acknowledge the negative views of sporting autobiographies as: limited in their expressive form, predictable in their plot, formulaic in nature, superficial in content, banal and cliché-ridden, dominated by anecdote and gossip, lacking in analysis and short on human insight, and economically driven by the youth market (as cited in Sparkes & Stewart (2015). Sparkes and Stewart (2015) challenge these negative views arguing that:

Given the conventions of writing that are expected and accepted in the academy, such as, those associated with the scientific tale for reporting quantitative work and the realist tale for reporting qualitative work ... then scholarly publications are no less formulaic than those of sporting autobiographies. (p. 115-116)

To combat the negative views associated with the sporting autobiographies as an academic source, scholars have noted that many sporting autobiographies are in fact, well written, involve complex plot lines, and provide illuminating insights into the lives of athletes and those involved with them before, during, and after their playing careers are over (Sparkes & Stewart, 2015). Beyond the player stats and records, the sporting autobiography tells a richer fuller story of interpretation and personal experiences. Pipkin (2008) illustrates how in contrast to the typical lens used for studying sport positioned “outside the lines,” sporting autobiographies can take researchers “inside the lines”:

In *Sporting Lives* I use sports autobiographies as my primary resources and the athletes’ own views of their experiences as the subject of my analysis because my overriding concern is not historical accuracy or the objective reliability of the athletes’ testimony but the way their subjective

expressions of their experiences reflect a view of sports, one different in key aspects from those written by journalists, historians, sociologists and others who do not sit inside the lines. (p. 3 as cited in Sparkes & Stewart, 2015)

Sporting autobiographies are important because they illustrate that this body of literature can be used as an analytical resource by critical sport studies researchers and can contribute significantly to our understanding of specific phenomenon in cultural sport studies. Sporting autobiographies are easy to access and are therefore a rich source of data when compared to the typical costs associated with interview-based research (Sparkes & Stewart, 2015). Ethical approval to use sporting autobiographies to investigate specific phenomenon is easy to obtain, specifically when dealing with sensitive subjects such as mental illness or drug abuse. The use of sporting biographies and sporting autoethnographies in critical sport studies will address a gap in understanding specific phenomenon with respect to the lived experiences of athletes.

There is also a distinguished gap between critical sport studies and the public sphere that few scholars address. Dave Zirin, a critical sports journalist, attempts to write in the space where sport and politics merge. Zirin points out a weakness in Noam Chomsky's argument that sport fosters social control and deters engagement, highlighting that Chomsky's position disregards that the passion we invest in sport is what can transform it from an escape from the mundane to a site of resistance. Zirin also points out, "just as sport can reflect the dominant ideas of our society, they can also reflect struggle" (King, 2008, p. 335). This prompts Zirin to distinguish his perspective on sport by being critical of the things many sports consumers passively accept. Zirin dives deeper

into major political events of the sporting world. For example, Zirin highlights how the public is aware of Billie Jean King's "Battle of the Sexes" tennis match against Bobby Riggs, but Zirin probes to explore how intertwined the match was with the fight for Title IX, one of the enduring victories of the women's liberation movement (King, 2008). Zirin examines how scholars who study sport can reach the broader public and make a difference in sport and society by debunking accepted truths. In King's (2008) article, he highlights how "sports is not sports" anymore, but part of a much bigger athletic industrial complex that affects the lives of sports fan and non-sport fans. I argue then that to bring awareness to the political messages we produce in playing, sporting autoethnographies can shed light on the ways sport manifests itself in our lives.

Writing Lives

There are many different writing styles that sporting autoethnographies can take. Autoethnography itself is a non-traditional writing style, but even then it can take many different forms. Megan Popovic (2010, 2012a) uses many different literary forms to examine feminist sport history. Popovic utilizes poetry, prose, drawings and photographs to document her sporting experiences. Her use of different boldface texts, fonts, spacing and alignment is a form of creative expression. Shellie McParland (2012, 2013) uses poetry, narrative and embodied writing to take readers into the process of autoethnographic writing. McParland (2013) uses the four quarters of a basketball game as the metaphorical framework to illustrate the many ways she interprets social and historical pressures of femininity of being an athlete and a woman. Through evoking emotion, she weaves concepts of broader themes in women's sport to concepts of lived time, space, body and experiences. Jayne Caudwell (2011, 2015) offers a multitextual

narrative of rowing through her autoethnographic writing. Caudwell adopts a storied style that is inspired by existing literature within qualitative sport studies and the significance of the use of narratives in sport. Caudwell writes about mental health and depression and opens an area of inquiry largely ignored in the field. She does this through very vulnerable, evocative writing. Their writing challenges conventional social science writing methods.

In consideration of autoethnographies about illness, trauma and end-of-life narratives, many concepts such as awareness of dying, acknowledging death, culture of grief, language of loss and understanding life and death are examined. Autoethnography is a relatively new qualitative research method in critical sport studies. Although the use of autoethnography as an analytical and pedagogical resource has not yet been fully explored, there are many key readings that contribute to the existing body of autoethnographic literature in critical sport studies. In addition, many autoethnographies in critical sport studies primarily address athletic identity through the lens of injury or retirement, focusing on emotions and embodiment. There is little autoethnographic research on the lived experiences of athletes. My autoethnography tells of my experiences as a student-athlete losing a teammate to cancer, and opens a dialogue for critically discussing loss, grief and death in critical sport studies. I explore and re-examine my negotiated identity as a varsity athlete, and rugby player. I illustrate the challenges of resisting the culture of grief that exists in an athletic context.

Chapter Three: Design

In this chapter, I outline the methodology and methods used to explore and analyze my experiences as a student-athlete losing a teammate to cancer. I focus on my own experiences and perspectives in telling this story. I re-examine my negotiated identity as a varsity rugby player who continually explores the counter narratives and resistance to the culture of grief that exists in an athletic context. This autoethnography highlights the challenges of coping with death in a team context to demonstrate my understanding of the concepts behind autoethnography, the challenges I faced and how autoethnography has shaped my outlook on sport and the thesis overall.

Autoethnography and postmodernism

Autoethnography has been widely used in the last two decades and is outlined by Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) as “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno),” (para.1). Ellis describes autoethnography as a process and product, by which traditional social science methods of research and representing others are treated as political, as well as socially just. Ellis et al. (2011) suggests the tenets of autobiography and ethnography are utilized to do and write in an autoethnographic manner.

Inspired by 1980s postmodernism, the “crisis of confidence” introduced new opportunities to reform social science. Ellis and Bochner (2000) discuss social science’s ontological, epistemological and axiological limitations that are hindered by “facts” and “truths” that scientists presented. They further explain how conventional understandings of facts and truths are inextricably tied to the vocabularies and paradigms used to

represent them. Postmodernism developed from French philosophers and sociologists, spearheaded by Jean-François Lyotard who believed that it was possible to tell stories from the perspectives of individuals and social groups, but impossible to generalize the world under a grand narrative (Savin-Baden & Major, 2012). Contributing also to the conversation of postmodernism, Michel Foucault suggests knowledge must be traced to the different discourses that framed the knowledge and as such, postmodernists are “concerned with the demise of the subject, the end of the author and the impossibility of truth” (Savin-Baden & Major, 2012, p. 28).

With this gradual shift into the postmodern paradigm, social science has the ability to transform theories to stories, and in turn, consider scholars to be self-consciously value-centered, rather than pretending to be objective and value free (Ellis et al., 2011). As a result, many scholars turned to autoethnography to:

produce meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience, research that would sensitize readers to issues of identity politics, to experiences shrouded in silence, and to forms of representation that deepen our capacity to empathize with people who are different from us. (Ellis et al., 2011, para. 3)

Autoethnography is a qualitative approach that acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than the assumption that research must be conducted from a neutral, impersonal and objective stance. Furthermore, following the conventional research methods of neutral, impersonal and objective stances implies that other

research methods are unsatisfactory and invalid including those within the postmodern paradigm.

Ellis (2004) notes that the interpretive, narrative, autoethnographic project has certain key features:

[T]he author usually writes in first person, making himself or herself the object of research. The narrative text focuses on generalization within a single case extended over time. The text is presented as a story replete with narrator, characterization, and plot line, akin to forms of writing associated with the novel or biography. The story often discloses hidden details of private life and highlights emotional experience. The ebb and flow of relationship experience is depicted in an episodic form that dramatizes the motion of connected lives across the curve of time. A reflexive connection exists between the lives of participants and researchers that must be explored. And the relationships between writers and readers of the texts is one of involvement and participation. (p. 30)

Ellis argues “autoethnography refers to the process as well as what is produced from the process” (2004, p. 32). Ellis continues to suggest that stories are the way humans make sense of their worlds and that stories are not unique to autoethnography. Ellis and other social science scholars are recognizing that differing personal experience creates different assumptions about the world. Autoethnography in the postmodern paradigm, widens our lens on the world by renouncing rigid definitions of what constitutes meaningful and useful research. It helps us understand and make sense of what we study, how we study it and what we say about it.

Autoethnography: Living in my world

Autoethnography has become a popularized qualitative research method in the last two decades. Autoethnography is a form of self-narrative that links the self (auto) with the culture (ethno). Autoethnography and other self-narratives represent diverse genres, themes and authorship (Chang, 2008). In recording the personal stories of self-narrators, authors are able to entwine the sociocultural contexts of the stories.

Consequently, the interlinked process of writing and studying one's own self-narrative are valuable in learning about the self and others from a cultural standpoint.

Autoethnography also allows for readers to compare and contrast their personal lived experiences to those of the author (Chang, 2008).

Autoethnography takes on a sociological, rather than psychological perspective, and as such goes on to say more about the larger cultural setting and scholarly discourse. The study of oneself is a powerful medium to ask research questions surrounding grief, trauma, illness, spirituality, epiphanies, oppression and so forth. Autoethnography reinforces the role of storytelling and personal narratives in the social sciences, by linking the researcher's personal experience to the wider cultural, political and social meanings and understandings. Autoethnography exists as a mechanism to 'honour the voice' of the storyteller. "Crisis of representation," a term coined by Denzin and Lincoln (1994), is one of many reasons scholars became increasingly troubled by the limitations of existing social science research methods. Autoethnographic scholars began to highlight how narratives poorly illustrated the relationships between authors, audiences and texts, because of the inherent complexities of relationships and mediums. Stories became social phenomena evoking meaning, morals and ethics, which introduced unique ways to help

people make sense of themselves and others (Ellis et al., 2011). There are opportunities in autoethnography for authors to link their personal perspective to broader theories, which may be harder to contextualize if I am not the researcher and research subject, concurrently. It is argued that the goal of autoethnographic research is not to eliminate traditional research methods, but to question its dominance. If I am not reflexive in my work, the work becomes only a summary of the works of other authors.

Autoethnography is described by Reed-Danahey, as a demanding synthesis of “postmodern ethnography (where realist conventions and value neutrality are called into questions) and postmodern autobiography (in which the idea of the coherent, individual self is similarly called into question)” (as cited in Allen-Collinson, 2012, p.4). Along with the crisis of representation, which is described as the genuine reflexivity of postmodern research, questions not only who and what should be represented, but which form of representation is best suited in relationship to hegemonic practices. With autoethnographic research where there is the search to discover personal experiences, there exists a relationship that is unique to researcher and participant. The unique relationship creates another crisis of voice. This issue of voice is apparent as the researcher can be critical only of his or her self-perspective while attempting to advocate or convey a greater awareness (Wall, 2008).

Autoethnographic approaches

There are many approaches to autoethnography. *Personal narratives* are autoethnographies where social scientists write evocatively with themselves as the phenomenon of study and the primary purpose is to understand a self or an aspect of a life in a cultural context (Ellis, 2004). *Indigenous* or *native ethnography* is another type of

autoethnography written by researchers who write as bicultural insiders/outside and depict a way of life through a personal construction of a cultural story (Ellis, 2004).

Reflexive or narrative ethnography focus on culture or subculture and authors use their stories to closely examine self and other interactions (Ellis, 2004). *Narrative*

ethnography, specifically, intertwines the author's story with the stories of people in the same culture or subculture. *Complete member research* is an approach to

autoethnography where researchers are fully committed and immersed in the group and during the research process, the researcher identifies with the group and 'becomes the

phenomenon' (Ellis, 2004). *Contingent autoethnography* is where an author writes about others, not planning to study the self, but during the research process discovers his or her connection to the phenomenon (Ellis, 2004).

Benefits of autoethnography as a research method

I am the narrator and main character. I am the researcher and research subject. It could be argued why I did not choose to do a case study on the death of teammate. My argument would be that autoethnography is a better approach than an ethnographic case study, for the simple reason that I do not want to re-open the wounds of my teammates. I write well, and I can critically analyze the events in the days, weeks, months and years before and after the death of a teammate. Mertens (1998) wrote, "The burden of transferability is on the reader to determine the degree of similarity between the study site and the receiving context. The researcher's responsibility is to provide sufficient detail to enable the reader to make such a judgment" (p.183). I would argue that I was prepared to accept the "burden of transferability," more so than teammates who have moved on.

Through my time at Brock University, I have become conscious of my ability to write powerfully. I have the ability to utilize the twenty-six letters of the Canadian English alphabet and create a scene of vivid imagery and perspective. I have also become conscious of how critical and methodical it is to read my work, page-by-page, sentence-by-sentence, word-by-word and letter-by-letter. This journey has opened my eyes to a whole world of academia I have at my fingertips. Autoethnography allows me to dissect my perspectives of the (colliding) world(s) through a personal narrative. It allows me to reflect on the experiences I am living in a critical way. Autoethnography empowers me to speak in a way that amplifies the manner in which I view the world through hazy brown eyes.

From my experience completing an undergraduate autoethnographic thesis, autoethnography has proved to be quite challenging. Autoethnographic research is a diversified avenue for collecting qualitative research. How do I know if I'm doing it 'right,' if there even is a 'right' way of doing it? After reading the works of Popovic (2010, 2012b), a previous professor in second year, I was completely astounded at the simplistic complexity of her work. Popovic's work is transformative. For once in my academic career, I am able to process that I do not need to find answers. I do not have to forge meaning in every academic avenue of my life, but I can if I so desire. In reading her work, I have realized that I can tell a story in an academic arena that appeals to more than my self-indulgence. I began to critically analyze all aspects of my life and to reflect on my lived experiences in a world that is forever changing, but often change remains undetected. This autoethnography will allow me to see, in words, how I grieve and process tragedy.

I find autoethnography fitting because it honours my voice, and my experience. By positioning my self, and my awareness of self as the focus of this thesis, I attempt to make sense of the lived experiences of myself, and my teammates. By positioning myself as both main character and narrator of this story, I am able to draw connections and offer a voice of comfort to others who have or will share similar experiences to me.

Challenges of autoethnography

There is a great deal of scepticism and criticism associated with autoethnographic research. Within autoethnographic research, there are accusations that the methods are often more autobiographical in nature, and therefore self-indulgent and less “scientific” or “scholarly.” Self, as the primary data source, serves to foster a critical viewpoint as self-indulgent, narcissistic, introspective and individualized (Wall, 2008). The self-narratives are viewed to lack social context, social action, and social interaction (Atkinson, 1997). Wall (2008) noted that barriers to acceptance of autoethnography include a lack of systematicity and methodological rigor. As a result of the varied epistemological and ontological assumptions associated with autoethnographic research, there are no traditional criteria in judging the value of such inquiry.

With autoethnographic research where there is the search to discover personal experiences, there exists a relationship that is unique to researcher and participant. The unique relationship creates another crisis of voice. Autoethnography is also often said to be ‘self-indulgent’ and I am consciously trying to make this research important to others and not just myself. I need a well-developed sense of critical reflexivity in order to avoid “self-indulgence.”

Challenges also arise in pursuing autoethnography. As Ellis (2007) relates, there is a danger in telling evocative stories that are valued highly through interpretation over the presentation of fact, especially when it comes to the involvement of those other than the autoethnographic self. Privacy of those who can be recognized by readers is of concern. This issue of relational ethics is extremely important, especially in this thesis as death is dark subject matter and it is uncomfortable to talk about, never mind reflecting on it. Relational ethics branches as a third dimension of ethics, after procedural ethics and ethics in practice (Ellis, 2007). Relational ethics values and recognizes respect, dignity and connectedness by requiring researchers to acknowledge continually changing bonds and relationships with research participants (Ellis, 2007).

Relational ethics applies when writing about others who have died, and as such dilemmas arise. In death, people lose legal rules of privacy, and these changing rules of privacy arguably change ethical standards for writing about those who have died. The problem is that it is easier to define what does not fall under ethical standards than it does to define what does. Autoethnography is a popular method of narrating loss, and the stories told in autoethnography serve as memorials to keep loved ones alive in memories (Ellis, 2007). As Ellis describes her struggle with position, I also struggle with considering how to position close relatives of my late teammate and how they will react. Again, like Ellis, I worry about how my thesis might disturb them. As a responsible scholar, I question whether it is morally right to inform the parents of Taylor that I am writing about my experience of losing a teammate, when their experience of loss is gravely different. Do I ask the permission of her parents before publishing? I am concerned that I will not be able to predict how people, teammates specifically, will

respond to my reflections. Ellis (2007) states, “To write an effective autoethnography demands showing perceived warts and bruises as well as the accolades and successes; thus risking this kind of criticism comes with the territory” (p. 17). Should I prepare then, to be faced with resistance and resentment from former teammates and coaches?

My place in the (sporting) world

As both researcher and narrator of this story, I am located at the postmodern crossroads between academia and experience. In autoethnographic research, the researcher is also the research subject. In undertaking autoethnography, I must acknowledge and accept certain autoethnographic tenets.

As an autoethnographer, I have responsibilities for the “others” in my personal narrative. This includes, but is not limited to the family of Taylor Ward, our varsity teammates, and the athletic community at Brock University. Having recently completed an undergraduate autoethnographic thesis, I am aware of the vulnerabilities I face in doing autoethnography. However, the topic of death and making sense of loss bears a cost to me personally, as it is difficult and dark for me. In doing this research, I revisit dark places of loss, and critically analyze my experiences. The demands of autoethnography require me to open myself to the reader to present an engaging narrative that relates my personal experience and issues to wider sociological themes and topics of death and loss (Dashper, 2015).

Having experienced death and loss of all sorts of traumas, writing autoethnographically has the potential to expose me in ways that are damaging in more than one facet of my life, including intrapersonally and interpersonally as well as my

academic career. The personal nature of autoethnography requires me to reveal my personal weaknesses, my presentation of self, as well as examine the traumas in my life.

As an early career autoethnographer, I present my story, my version of the bigger story of experiencing the culture of grief in sport in such a way that explores how the death of a young athlete is experienced. Specifically, this thesis highlights the use of personal, critical narratives in fragmented dialogue between (re)negotiated athletic and personal identities in helping to understand and come to terms with loss.

Autoethnography as a qualitative research method seeks to “offer multiple ways of thinking about a topic, reaching diverse audiences, and nurturing the writer” (Richardson, 2000, p. 5). As such, many autoethnographies are compelling narratives of loss. By using personal, autobiographical writing as a strategy for academic research, I am able to offer a voice, perhaps one of comfort, to others who have or will share similar experiences to me, and contribute to the study of grief and death within sport and physical cultural studies.

I have been drawn to autoethnography for similar reasons to many other scholars in the field. Autoethnography as a research method seeks to bridge a gap between cultural understanding and personal lived experience. There exists a certain transparency in autoethnography and as such, it allows researchers to “better understand and learn from each other while showing the interconnectedness of the human experience” (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014, p. 15). I am not the only athlete to experience the death of a teammate. By applying self-reflexivity to this experience, I am contributing to a conversation that last been left out of academia, media and athletics. This experience, and other experiences of loss have led me down a labyrinth of self-reflection. Who am I to tell the story that so

many athletes have suffered from? I feel strongly about autoethnography as a compelling qualitative research method because with autoethnography, I can finally write about my experiences and not view it as wasteful, because finally, my personal experiences and my academic avenues are aligned.

This research addresses a significant gap in the research literature on the experiences of athletes who are faced with illness, disease or death in a team setting. As outlined in chapter two, most literature on loss is based in sport psychology and primarily addresses athletic identity through the lens of injury or retirement. Autoethnography is a powerful tool as it draws from personal experiences that inform us of the lived realities of individuals. The social reality of athlete illness and death in team settings is experienced differently by each individual on the team, and by unpacking the experiences of the individual; the reality of the loss for all can be better understood.

Issues of truthfulness in autoethnography

Ellis (2004) assumes that there is no single standard of truth, which questions the concept of descriptive validity. She argues that all validity is “interpretive and dependent on context and the understandings we bring to the observation” (p.123). Ellis (re)defines validity in autoethnography as:

what happens to readers as well as research participants and researchers.

To me, validity means that our work seems verisimilitude; it evokes in readers a feeling that the experience defined is lifelike, believable and possible. You can also judge validity by whether it helps readers communicate with others different from themselves or offers a way to improve the lives of participants and readers – or even your own. (p. 124)

Laurel Richardson uses a metaphor of a crystal to deconstruct traditional validity, “a crystal has a infinite number of shapes, dimensions and angles. It acts a prism and changes shape, but still has structure. What we see depends on our angle of vision” (as cited in Ellis, 2004, p. 124). Patti Lather mentions four subtypes of counter-practices that rupture validity as a ‘regime of truth’: “ironic validity, concerning the problems of representation; paralogical validity, which honours differences and uncertainties; rhizomatic validity, which seeks out multiplicity; and voluptuous validity, which seeks out ethics through practices of engagement and self-reflexivity” (as cited in Ellis, 2004, pp. 124-125). These authors offer many transgressive definitions to interpret validity as we see fit for our autoethnographies.

Ellis (2004) states, “there is nothing more theoretical or analytical than a good story” (p.194). Ellis argues that stories are always being tested for generalizability. However, they are not tested in the traditional way through samples of respondents, but by readers as they determine if a story speaks to them about their experiences through a process of theoretical validation. Bochner suggests if we think of theory as social, concerns of generalization become less about representation and more about communication (as cited in Ellis, 2004).

Writing autoethnography

There are many ways to write autoethnographically. Ellis describes social science as a spectrum between art and science and how you position yourself along that spectrum will dictate how you will write autoethnographically (2004). She claims if you locate yourself closer to traditional ethnographic methods, it is best to keep notes on the experience as it happened, and then use those as field notes to write from. If you locate

yourself closer to art, your goal is not to portray the facts, but to convey the meanings attached to the experience (Ellis, 2004).

I locate myself closer to the artistic end of the spectrum than science. I value the meanings attached to my experiences. The way I present myself in this autoethnography will transform and evolve as I uncover the authentic self. The way I write autoethnographically changed throughout the research process, but my autoethnographic research story came to fruition through creative writing pieces and retrospective journal entries. The grief I experienced is personified, written as soliloquies and speaks throughout the next chapter throughout my experience as an athlete grieving a teammate. My autoethnography pieces together fragmented narratives of grief and loss in conversations between myself, an athlete and the grief I experience.

Data Collection and Sources

In undertaking this autoethnographic research, I was determined to shed light on the intricacies of grief in critical sport studies. I wanted to share my experience as an athlete who continues to struggle with the death of a teammate, in a world where athletics was my alternate reality. Autoethnography was best suited for this project as a means for me to fully understand my role as a researcher, diving into the depths of my personal loss. The significance of autoethnography in relation to this project is the reflexivity I employed. To understand and reflect on the raw experiences of a teammate's death may help myself and others make sense of loss.

In autoethnography, researchers occupy demanding roles as members of the subculture being studied and a researcher of the same subculture. It is argued that the goal of autoethnographic research is not to eliminate traditional research methods, but to

question its dominance. Context of doubt and scepticism fosters the growth and emergence of critical theories. This allows new “methods” to be subjected to critique, and yet shine through a new reflexive lens (Wall, 2008).

This method employs the researcher as a key player in the data collection process (Allen-Collinson, 2012). Autoethnography is contrasted to the more traditional methods of qualitative research where the researcher plays a neutral role in the ethnographic field. This method draws on the recording and writing of personal experiences and their connection to a cultural context.

Personal memory data.

As a key player in the data collection process, I recorded and wrote personal experiences through personal memory recall in journal entries. The timing of journaling and recording of experience retrospectively documented my experience since Taylor’s death in 2013. Beginning in September 2015, I began to write about the experience of losing a teammate to cancer. These journal entries were loosely guided by questions I had surrounding feelings I had about rugby and a teammate who died. These specific events and accounts have been generated through memory recall and are not exhaustive. Specifically, I journaled about the season before Taylor came to Brock University, and what the season was like. I wrote my autoethnography from two perspectives, the grief I experienced as an athlete, and as an academic reflecting on the experience.

In writing these journal entries, I decided to write as often as I felt necessary. I had no plans to stick to a writing schedule, as I felt my work and journal entries would be inauthentic and not as trustworthy as I felt they could be. I wrote without editing, often

leaving many journal entries “unfinished” or “incomplete” to allow myself to fully encapsulate and draw from the emotional rawness of these experiences.

I collected data in the form of journaling and creative writing. Journaling was loosely structured and was often contextual and aligned with the experiences I had in years previous. For example, I wrote about my first impression of rugby just as rugby season was gearing up again. Memory recall was my primary method of data collection. The content of the data is autobiographical, where the analysis and interpretation has a cultural orientation. As humans, our lived experiences have led us to acquire varying inclinations to think, feel or act in ways that are determined by experiences. This cultural orientation defines the groundwork of differences among individuals (Chang, 2008).

My experiences within a culture of grief in women’s rugby were recorded in a narrative format in my journals. This allowed greater flexibility in how I recorded what I was trying to say, as well as allowing my data collection to be freely structured.

It is important to note that there is no clear memory path. Memory recall of the events I experienced did not come back to me in chronological order. It was messy, sporadic and chaotic, and as such the writing that follows in my autoethnography is also messy, sporadic and chaotic. As a reader of the text, it is imperative to know that there is no solid ground to walk on as you navigate the text. The space and time in which I have written troubles the notion of a clear memory path and explores how traumatic events deviate from a chronological path, with a random and insistent calling of trauma showing up whenever and wherever. Journal entries are not presented in a chronological format and are situational and reflective of the time and experiences I was undertaking as I began to journal through September 2015 to April 2017.

Data management

I organized and managed my creative writing and journal entries in Microsoft Word documents. In managing my data, I will keep my expressive creative writing pieces separate from my journal entries. In my journal entries, each entry is dated and I am the sole recorder of data.

As I have collected mostly memory data, historical context is important to note because the original timing of data is different from the collection of data. I had two different contexts to understand when analyzing and interpreting data because I retrospectively analyzed my data. It is important to note that data collection, management and analysis is not a linear process (Chang, 2008). The steps overlap, as one activity modifies and informs another. The data collection process is often intertwined with data analysis and interpretation, and often takes place concurrently in a cyclical process.

Data analysis and interpretation

As stated above, autoethnography does not proceed linearly. There is no chronological process to follow as the “stages” of autoethnography often overlap, and are experienced concurrently (Ellis, 2004). As Ellis (2004) describes, there is no easy answers when it comes to analyzing and interpreting autoethnographic data. In traditional ethnographic inquiry, data is analyzed through a wide array of reflexive screens such as, culture, age, gender, class, social status, education, family, political praxis, language, and values. While data analysis does occur in autoethnography, it happens before and during the autoethnographic process. My personal experience and reflections served as the primary source of data to be analyzed. However, I also analyzed the process of undertaking an autoethnography of loss, retrospectively. It is important to note that

context plays a pivotal role in the data analysis process, which explores the relationship between self and others. Throughout my autoethnography, I highlighted certain periods of time where context was important because my writing is retrospective. Unfortunately, I am not immune to life's happenings, and my writing was influenced by occurrences in my life, such as the five funerals I attended in a two-year span of close friends and family.

Data analysis and interpretation are the crux of the research process. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) state: "The process of analysis, evaluation, and interpretation are neither terminal nor mechanical. They are always emergent, unpredictable and unfinished" (p. 479). Analysis and interpretation allows researcher to piece together fragmented sets of data under a broader culturally meaningful explanation. This step in autoethnographic data analysis and interpretation is vital because it distinguishes itself from other self-narratives that focus on storytelling. In autoethnography and ethnography, the data sets do not stand alone, but the researchers review, analyze, and probe data in order to comprehend how behaviours, ideas, and experiences relate and what it means to the researchers and their environments (Chang, 2008).

Ellis discusses three ways analysis takes place in narrative: narrative analysis, thematic analysis of narrative and structural analysis of narrative (2004). Narrative analysis assumes that when people tell a story, they use analytic techniques to interpret their worlds, as stories themselves are both theoretical and analytical. Thematic analysis refers to stories as data and uses analysis to highlight themes that illustrate the content within and across stories (Ellis, 2004). This is similar to grounded theory where researchers inductively present their findings in traditional forms of categories and

theories. Structural analysis of narrative begins with stories and researchers analyze them in terms of their structures, addressing questions such as: “What strategies did the storyteller use to reach the audience, or to convince oneself, or to find one’s way in the world?” (Ellis, 2004, p. 197). Ellis posits these strategies for autoethnographic analyzed can be combined in many ways.

Meta-Autoethnography

Meta-autoethnography is an attempt to connect the past to the present (Ellis, 2009). Meta-autoethnography revisits the original representations and accounts, considers responses to original representations and is an opportunity to write an autoethnographic account about autoethnography. Our versions of our personal histories change as we encounter new life experiences. “We are constantly having to revise the plot as new events are added to our lives” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p.150, as cited in Ellis, 2009, p. 13). Re-examining our experiences and the stories we tell about our experiences allow us to deepen our understandings of our lives, the culture we are immersed in and the work we have done (Ellis, 2009).

Autoethnography is limiting in the sense that “experience cannot be captured fully; once it happens, it can only be interpreted from limited and partial perspectives” (Ellis, 2009, p. 15). This is where meta-autoethnography steps in. Ellis (2009) posits that by telling and writing, looking back, and reinterpreting, we come to see ourselves in new ways by reframing our lives in ways that might be easier to bear. Meta-autoethnographies consist of:

current reflections, narrative vignettes, story interludes, and analyses in numerous forms: dialogue with friends and family; reactions from critics, reconsiderations

of my positions, and talking back to critics; responses from participants and dialogues that I have with my own thoughts; email exchanges; plays and scripts; artistic works; narrative essays; and analytic essays. (Ellis, p. 303)

The different ways that we look back and retell our stories allow us to shape our identities as we relate to others. Meta-autoethnography allows us to find meaning in and understand human experience in the groups we are a part of as we experience our individual stories and relate to how they are intertwined with others.

Chapter Four: Writing Lives, Writing Loss

My autoethnography is presented as a personal narrative across fractured and nonlinear time spans from 2009 to 2017. As a grieving teammate, I visit and re-visit my experiences with grief in a sporting context. The grief I experience is personified and speaks throughout the chapter in conversations with past and present representations of my self. The research story is a perfect storm of literary experimentation, piecing together fragmented narratives of grief and loss in conversations between myself, an athlete and the grief I experience.

Grief's First Touch

❖ Allow me to introduce myself ❖

Who am I, you ask?

I am the shadows you see in a dark room.

I am the blanket you pull over your thoughts but I won't let you sleep.

I am the monster you hide between your ears when I don't fit under the bed anymore.

I am a contortionist. I linger in spaces and places you would never expect to find me.

I come after Death and I never leave. I show up invited and uninvited, and although I might depart briefly, I come back seasonally.

I am her one true love.

Her and I are old friends. We met when she was a little girl, only a few short months after her eleventh birthday. Death, a distant cousin of mine, introduced us after her friend,

Raichel, died in a car accident when her mother fell asleep at the wheel. Now, I know what you must be thinking, "Why don't you just leave her alone?" I wish I could, but this

friendship is only strengthened by her unwavering attraction to me. She craves me in

ways no one else ever has. Why would I let her go?

❖ Writing Loss ❖

Dear Life,

Last night I saw an empty house with all the lights on and I'm not sure there's a better way to describe her.

The following is inner dialogue from September 2015 when I began journaling about the loss of a teammate. Rugby season had started, and although I was not playing due to injury, I was with the team running fitness sessions once a week.

This is probably my fourth time trying to start to journal. I'm fine once I start. The problem is getting started. The emotions I feel about Taylor's death and how it has impacted the team is like Pandora's box. This is the next two years of my life. I think it's a good thing, you know, I think this is what I need to help understand loss in my life. I think it's easier to attach meaning to something if I see it through an athletic lens. I've only ever known two things in my life – academics and athletics. I may have never been on a winning team, but I've been the underdog time and time again. My story is different though. There is no big underdog comeback. There's just loss. Lots of it, too. Losses by over 100, losses by a single point, losses in the first fifteen minutes, losses in the last forty seconds.

This would have been my fifth and final year as a varsity rugby player. What a rollercoaster. First year, coming into Brock, I attended a few fitness sessions in their offseason. I destroyed everyone by levels after finishing a level 14.2 on the beep test. I was ready for OUA rugby. And then I broke my ankle. I still have a burning urge to hurt the girl who broke my ankle in an illegal tackle, only days before the National Championships, which was days before a Rugby Canada ID Selection Camp. I should have taken the broken ankle as a sign of years of heartbreak to come. My cast was removed 2 short weeks before the season opener. Our season opener was against the University of Waterloo Warriors. I started, despite being in a cast for 8 weeks prior. I played hard through the first half, and half of the second half before my sensitive ankle got wrapped around in a ruck and the coach pulled my pathetic limping body off the field. I don't blame him now. We were losing a close game 15-5 and we still had over 6 weeks of rugby to play. The final score was a 15-5 loss, but the team held their heads high. We

had a great group of first years the year I started. We were a tight knit group of girls. There were 15 first year players, which is a lot, and a few of us started.

In my opinion, it is a weird phenomenon for first years to make the starting line-up. Not because it's weird that they're starting, but how other athletes, as well as spectators perceive first year starters. Personally, I think that if you work hard in practice, and your skill level is where it needs to be, I don't see why there is an issue with first years starting over a player who has been with the team longer. Reflecting on my fifth year now, it's an issue on this team, with this group of girls. But that's a tale for another day. This year's team, 2015-2016, is a team I feel extremely disconnected with. Partly, it's because I'm not playing due to a torn ACL. I was just over four months post op when training camp rolled around. I could have maybe played, but it was in my best interests not to.

As of right now, I'm still trying to keep my head above water because I fear that once I'm in this, I may drown. I have this attraction to death and I feel everything so deeply. It's a curse. Maybe it's because I believe that on some level, there are only a finite amount of shitty things that can happen. So if it's happening to me, someone, somewhere isn't suffering like I am. It's weird to think there's this gray area, because for me, everything is black and white.

Introduction to Rugby Culture

❖ Rules Change As You Play The Game ❖

You can't keep dancing with the devil and ask why you're still in hell.
 I am made from all the people I've encountered and all the things I have experienced.
 I hold the laughter of my teammates, the arguments with my coaches, and the chattering of large crowds. There are scars from cracked bones, bitter words from heated arguments, bruises I cannot see and emotions I cannot convey.
 I am made from all these people and moments.

That is who I am, and I will dance.

In the following, I am reflecting on my first account of rugby, which was almost a decade ago. In hindsight, the teams I played for, the age group and the level of play shaped my cultural experiences with rugby.

My first impression of rugby was quite memorable. I watched my cousin throw up after a high school 7s practice in grade 9. I started my rugby career the next day.

Rugby, to outsiders, is a barbaric game played by hooligans who just smash the shit out of each other, and then get smashed on cheap beer with good company.

I thought it was so much more than that. I left soccer, and inevitably, a great varsity soccer opportunity to become something better, to be a better athlete. I wanted to do something more than play soccer. Everyone considered themselves a soccer player. I knew I wouldn't play high level soccer. The opportunity just wasn't there in my area.

Rugby, to me, right away became a lifestyle. My group of friends changed immediately. I started hanging out with older, but less mature teammates. My natural athletic ability propelled me into a provincial rugby player after 40 minutes. I had played my first game of rugby when the referee, Bob, approached me and asked me to try out for Rugby Ontario's U17 team. My perception changed.

Rugby became less about underage drinking after games. It became a masquerade of invincibility. A sense of pride I had never before experienced. I became an insider of a culture that consumed me entirely.

I loved the tackling. I loved the open field hits. Other players who towered over my petite structure ran at me thinking they could run over me – and I put them on their asses. Again and again.

I first thought, “Wow, I get to tackle players for 80 minutes, and then we share stories over beers. This is great. What a respectable game.” I mean, what other sport does that? Hockey is so chirpy, filled with cheap shots and bad hair. Soccer is filled with players who think the ref wears the same jersey as the other team. I was never tall enough for basketball or volleyball. I didn’t have the opportunity to try anything else.

Something changed. I don’t know when. But it’s not the same anymore. Sometime during my varsity career I lost the will to play. Conversation starters morphed from, “Hi, I’m Katie Faust and I play varsity rugby,” to “Hi, my name is Katie Faust, and I am a Masters student.” I don’t know if it was the game itself, or if my teammates, who have influenced me so heavily over the last 10 years have driven me away from the game.

My first team – the Saugeen District Secondary School Royals. After the first practice, the captain, said to me, “Faust, have you ever been drunk?” I replied, “No, I’m still underage.” I was laughed at and ridiculed by my teammates. I got drunk for the first time that Friday.

Rugby Ontario U17 – my first provincial stint at 15 years old. I was coached by Beth, and she changed the game for me. She opened my eyes to a sporting world of opportunity. She saw in me more than I had ever seen in myself before. She showed me rugby, real rugby.

I played on and off throughout high school – on high school teams, club teams and provincial teams. I had a few injuries, a surgery and lots of bruises – but I was still a rugby player. I still had a burning desire to play the game.

I went on to play in my first year of university. We made playoffs and had a thrilling triple overtime win, only to lose in semis. It was a rush. I was so emotionally

caught up in the game. The ball was kicked in open play, and the ref whistled the play dead with the ball mid air. An opposing player had tackled my fullback after the whistle – illegal in the laws of the game – and without hesitation, I grabbed that player by the shoulders and threw her backwards. I felt like I had to protect my fullback. I was issued a warning, understandably, as I had also broken the laws of the game. But in that moment, I still felt like I was part of something. Part of a team who cared.

I'm starting to cry now. I can do this. I can write about this.

As the years went on, Taylor came, and Taylor left. I've told the story, so I'm not going into any more detail. Things changed. I was no longer a rugby player. I hadn't protected my team. I watched 35 girls mourn over the loss of one of our own.

My academia is showing. From my earliest creative writing pieces, I've had a resistance to those with a hero complex. I struggled with mental health issues as a teenager and I wrote about saving myself:

The Longest Road

Silence. It's bittersweet. It can be as pleasing to the ears as a thousand harmonics. There is something special about it. The earth, as loud and roaring with life as ever, can be expressed through silence. Its purity exceeds all. But for me, silence screams out a bitter reality: I am alone. There is no one to travel this lonely road of life with. Silence sounds no worse than melodies parading from the radio. All roads come to an end. Some long, some short, some smooth, and some are really, really rough. There are people in your life that are so fake they will try to cover up the bumps along your road. They believe they can just ice it over, and numb the pain. It is comparable to a thick sheet of black ice, masked by university degrees and diplomas. They bully their way into your life, and coat you with their 'sincere concern' for your well-being. There are two ways of interpreting this – it's cold and slippery, or it melts and you're left with a mess.

These 'ice' people surround you, and exile you from reality. You're left with a false sense of security. Ice is not secure. It melts, cracks and disappears almost as fast as it appears. It is only there for the storm, after that, you are alone. All is silent. When things get really cold, you can count on a nice sheet of black ice to be lurking under the deceiving soft cotton like layer of snow, like icing over unbaked cake mix. You can't always see it coming, and once you're slipping on faith that you will regain control of the situation, no trust that you will ever recover.

The ice is there, and when you touch it, it stings and burns as hot as ashes from the wildest fires. The hatred inspired by this lack of security is powerfully evoking emotions you have never experience before. You begin to slowly fall into this loop of believing you are actually at risk. They have convinced you that you are in grave danger of crashing before you safely reach the end of your road. They have convinced you that this ice is your protection, but ice melts.

Ice melts for a reason, or a season. The reasons are obviously circumstantial. Seasons aren't a sure thing either. Seasons on this road aren't dependent on solar and lunar activity. These seasons occur after you've come so far on your own road. It's not a set place on this road; it's what you make of it. It happens when you're running low and you pull through for those last few miles. It's getting back on track after breaking down and crashing on the side of the road. These moments in your life, these seasons are all that remains with you while you travel this road. Ice melts, and when it does, you're left with a mess. Trudging through miles and miles of melting ice, trying to solidify and trap you within its icy clutches. When the ice melts, the 'ice' people are gone, but now exist in altered shapes, and camouflage themselves in the nooks and crannies of your life – your ultimate weakness; to have ice expand in the cracks of your life and destroy your foundation of sanity. It becomes a puddle in the middle of the road, another obstacle. One little, tiny puddle and you're drowning. Drowning in everything imaginable. It is inevitable. Once you let that ice in, it exists everywhere on your road as a potential threat – solid or liquid. Don't forget your winter tires, and your water wings.

Not a single road is the same. Roads can be perfect asphalt with wet paint dividing sanity and insanity, or they can be a rough, off-road terrain with many bumps, puddles and potholes. Not every road leads to the same place, but every road will lead somewhere. Some take the high road, the road to fame and fortune, or the long road to nowhere. Roads have twists, turns, bends, hills and valleys. Some parts will be harder than others. With all this in mind – there are detours. Not every road is set in stone. There are places under construction on this road and sometimes it is necessary to reroute. It is controversial to say, "There are no shortcuts to any place worth going," and to say, "Take the long, hard way." It is dependent on the road, and what is best for the one travelling it. Detours can put you ahead, and they can hold you back. It's up to you. You're at the wheel at all times. You can choose to let hitchhikers in, and you can choose to kick anyone to the curb. Travel your road with your eyes on the path ahead, and don't get caught staring in the rear view mirror. Travel with your head held high, because you deserve it. You can look back and see how far you've come, but in all reality, it is minimal compared to how far you can go. Go the distance, not for him, her, or me. For you. Just drive, two hands on the wheel. You'll get to where you're going, when you're ready (Author, online journal, 2009).

A month after I wrote this I attempted suicide. The first of many attempts. Through writing, I was forced to laboriously examine my identity and I came to know myself as my own hero, something, someone I resisted. When I first started this research story, I was set on this piece as a memorial and tribute to a lost teammate. However, as I continued to immerse myself in the literature, I became more aware of the language I was using and how it was problematic. Narratives are compelling

identity constructors and play an important role in how we see ourselves in relation to others, and our knowledge to the world. Certain phrases, or words are common in the language we use to talk about sport. Sport is often termed as “heroic” or “redemptive,” and we describe games as ‘battles’ and comebacks as ‘struggles.’ This brings into consideration reflective questions such as: “If we dedicate our season to Taylor, what does it mean if we win? Or lose? How do we measure a dedicated season?”

Cathy van Ingen, my supervisor, highlights within Shape Your Life, a recreational boxing program for women and trans survivors of violence to regain control of their bodies through physical activity interventions, “it’s complicated because all funders really want is this beautiful, tidy, redemptive narrative,” (Samson, 2017, para. 6). She responds to this tension by valuing the participant’s stories over analysis as a way to reposition herself away from traditional “researcher as expert” ideologies to “endorse complexity, partial truths, and multiple subjectivities” (van Ingen, 2016, p. 6).

How do I tell this story without the heroic narrative? Everyone wants to hear how the team rallied together and became stronger over the death of a teammate. That didn’t happen. We fell apart. The program went under. The coach’s attendance dropped to once a week. We lost every game, and haven’t won a game since (two years later). Even with a new coach, we haven’t been a team.

I played an amazing season in my fourth year. I was named an OUA All-Star, CIS Academic All-Canadian, and the team’s MVP. Looking back on it now, I was driven to leave an impact on the program. I wanted to leave my name. I am a superstitious player. I have retired my cleats. I no longer wear them. I no longer wear any Brock University clothing that says “RUGBY” on it.

The year after Taylor passed away, we had a moment of silence during our season opener. At half time, we were losing 10-0. The coach, a well respected individual in the rugby community, and the captain of my first provincial team looked at me and said, “Faust, how many more minutes can I get out of you?” I looked at her stunned. “I have

the heart for 80 minutes.” “That’s all I needed to hear.” We went on to lose the game by a large margin. The part that still bothers me the most to this day was after we were scored on, and a teammate says, “Don’t worry guys. Only 30 more minutes and then we can get shitfaced.”

Pardon me? We’re playing a varsity rugby game, our season opener, dedicated to Taylor and you want to get drunk? Fuck you.

Fuck everything. Is that what varsity rugby has become? You just want to get your ass kicked for 80 minutes and get shitfaced after because that’s the “culture” of rugby? Fuck you.

How can you pick and choose what parts of the rugby culture you want to adhere to? How can you decide that the communal aspect of the game happens off the field in a bar instead of for 80 minutes on a pitch? It’s fucking 80 minutes. Have some heart.

I cried after that game. It meant so much to me. I was playing for a 16th player, for a girl who will never wear a jersey again because she’s in an urn in her parents’ house. Fuck you. I can’t play on a team where you value the after game socials as the most important part of the game. Why is there a Brock Badgers crest on the left chest of your sweater, over your heart if your heart isn’t in it?

I don’t want to play with you. I don’t want to play anymore. What happened to the camaraderie? What happened to playing for reasons bigger than yourself?

Oh, I am a hypocrite. I am trying to be the hero I hate so much. I can’t save rugby here, I can’t save anything.

Rugby players have an identity built out of community, but that community foundation is falling apart.

I have a fascination with death.

I think about dying all the time. It's a once-in-a-lifetime thing – pun intended.

I can't wait to die.

I frequently think about all the things I want to do with my life, and how I would feel a sense of accomplishment when I complete them – and then I think, I won't have to worry about a sense of accomplishment if I'm dead.

What happens when you die?

I first thought about killing myself when I was 6 years old. It was a summer night, and I was a relatively happy six year old. I was sitting on the end of my bed, staring out my bedroom window. The glow of the summer sun peaking behind the barn. I went into my closet and grabbed a Jump Rope For Heart skipping rope. I used the skills I had learned in Girl Scouts to tie a noose. I tucked the rope under my pillow. I had planned on climbing out my bedroom window, and down to my swing set in the backyard to hang myself. I waited at the end of the bed for the sun to set behind the barn completely. I woke up the next morning, and untied the noose in the skipping rope and threw it back in my closet.

Imagine being six years old and thinking that my life was completely saturated – like I had done everything I was going to do by age six.

Okay, I'm done writing. That's enough for one day.

❖ Time – Out ❖

I am an athlete. I am a rugby player.

One of the very first inspirational quotes I ever heard was,

“When you reach the end of your rope, tie a knot and hold on.”

I'm not going to tell you the underdog story you expect to hear about athletes.

My teammate died, and as cliché as it is to say, maybe I died a little that day too.

See, rugby didn't save my life – it gave me life.

So what do you do when your lifeline becomes so entangled it forms the noose you hang
around your neck?

The jersey you wore like skin no longer fits.

Because the teammate who always stood to my left on the field, is replaced with a patch
on the right shoulder of our jerseys.

I began to struggle immensely with academics and athletics. I was very angry, and my
mental health was visibly concerning. The literature I was reading has flipped my
identity, and who I thought I was on my head. I felt lost.

I exist in two worlds. I can only begin to explain how that feels by deconstructing my
identity.

Katie,

You are sweet, and caring. You have a passion for life, and to live. You crave experience
and all things good in the world. Your smile pulls on heart strings and your eyes are a
portal to another universe. You run free. Nothing will hold you back.

Faust,

You are dark. There is something mysterious about you. You are attracted to the
emotions that people ...

Here, I am lost. My journal entries are incomplete. I struggled to put into words how I
viewed myself. If the words I used to describe myself were painted, I would be a
blank canvas. The following is fragmented and mirrors my experiences at the time.

Who am I? Where am I? What surrounds me? Does anything really surround me? Am I a
person before I am an academic?

Sometimes, I don't feel like that. I was asked if I would leave my partner before I gave up
research. I answered honestly, "yes."

Am I an athlete anymore?

I want to play sports, but I don't feel like an athlete. I don't want to be around other athletes. Why? I wish I knew. I want to feel like I'm a part of something. But once I am, I want to get out so quickly.

I'm thinking of joining an AFL league in Hamilton. Why Aussie Rules Football? Because it's rugby but it is not rugby. I can play the game I love, but it is not the game I love.

Maybe I only liked rugby because I was good at it, naturally, despite my small physique.

I'm not tall enough to be an exceptional Aussie player, but I think I will excel.

My dad asked me why I still play rugby.

Two surgeries, two broken bones, two concussions.

Camaraderie? No, that's not it.

Physicality? It's nice, but no, that's not it.

I'm longing to wear a club jersey again. It's a skin I cannot shed. Without that jersey, I feel exposed. Material things.

What about the other jerseys? Who could I have been in a Team Canada jersey? Why didn't I work harder?

Sports and Mental Health.

Play. Play games.

Life is a game, they say.

Who wins?

Is death losing?

Or winning?

Why the phobia of death?

Do we have phobias of losing?

Why?

I don't know the answers.

A new sporting experience – Aussie Rules

I need to get out.

I need something new.

Why am I trying so hard to escape rugby?

A sport that I took on and spent 10 years of my life playing, enjoying.

I cannot make you understand. I cannot make anyone understand what is happening inside me. I cannot even explain it to myself.

❖ The Defeated Athlete ❖

We know.

We know what it's like to lose.

We know what it's like to want to give up, and what giving up feels like.

We know what it's like to be beaten so badly we don't ever want to play again.

We know.

But we know more than you'll ever know.

We know that there are no limitations.

The only things holding us back are our own ideas of what is and what is not possible.

We know what we are and we know that what we can be is only a leap of faith away.

We know that when it comes to success, luck is not what got us there.

By October 2016, regular rugby season had just ended, and playoff season was just beginning. Ontario University Athletics (OUA) playoffs were held over three weeks in October, with USports, formerly known as Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS) Championships the following weekend. I have never played in an OUA or USports medal match, but I have been teammates with players who have. I feel their wins, and I feel their losses.

The hangover hurts.

The hangover wasn't induced by alcohol. It was just a high – of happiness. One

Saturday in September 2015, we faced Guelph in the OUA Quarter Finals, something we

haven't done since I was in second year. In regular season action, Guelph set an OUA and CIS scoring record of 125 points for. They smashed that record. The OUA Quarter Final score was 140-5. Yes, we scored. It was a beautiful try. We started deep in our own end. Nine phases of perfectly executed rugby. As far back as Badger Athletics records go for women's rugby, the 2009-2010 season, Brock has never scored on Guelph. This year, we ended that streak. This year marks a new beginning for Brock's women's rugby team. The try in the last minute of a brutal game changes everything for Brock Rugby.

I don't think we could have done it without all players from the years before us. I say that, because Taylor has been around a lot this year. Maybe it's just in my head, but there has been a lot of talk about her. And everyone before that, as well. With the coaching change in my fourth year, I realized it was going to be an uphill battle. Not only because the level of rugby across the country is reaching new heights, but because of our team. There's something about this team. I don't know what it is, and I don't think I ever will. It's hard to try to understand something you don't agree with.

I'm a numbers person. I like numbers because numbers tell truths words can't. Statistically speaking, we should have finished with a 3-2 record, instead of our 0-4-1 record. I hate clichés. The whole "hard work beats talent when talent doesn't work hard" phrase is bullshit. It's bullshit because our team doesn't believe it. This team doesn't buy into this, or anything else. By the numbers, we could be, at the very least, an OUA medal team.

Again, the hangover hurts.

Yesterday, I watched the Queen's University Gaels lose a heartbreaker to McMaster University Marauders. The final score was 27-3. The day before yesterday, I

watched the Gaels stomp the Concordia Stingers. The final score was 27-13. The day before that, I watched the Gaels overcome a 17-0 deficit to defeat top seeded Acadia. The final score was 24-17.

I have an attraction to underdogs. I have this sickening desire to always be close to winning, but wanting to hurt after a loss. I became attached to Gaels over the last three days. Maybe because I know some of the girls, and the coaches personally, or maybe because I love losing. I love the feeling of a loss.

❖ Grieving Her Broken Body ❖

One time, she and I met again and I asked her, “Where do you feel stuff?”

I keep anger in my breastbone; she holds it in her hands.

I feel sadness on my shoulders; she feels it in her lungs.

I told her, “You're going to be okay. I don't mean you're going to live, I mean it's just "okay." The thing about death is that it becomes so easily sutured into our mundane lives.

Our relationship is seasonal, not linear. You'll see me in parts of your life you'd never expect to see me. You're going to have to learn to live a life without people you care for and you're going to find a new normal, and you're going to be okay.”

At this point in the semester, November 2016, I was completely overwhelmed by this research project. I was coming to realize that it would not be what I had envisioned it to be. It wasn't about Taylor at all, and I began to question why I did anything at all.

This is taking its toll on me. I knew it would, but I didn't think it would happen this fast.

Late last week, when the weather was nice, a whooping 19 degrees in November, I went for a run. I planned to run through campus, starting at the back of Walker Complex, and down Glenridge Hill, across Lockhart Drive and finish back at Walker Complex by running up Hydro Hill. The first few steps were great, and the next few brought me to tears. I had pain surrounding my entire knee joint – the back, the front, everywhere. Any pressure at all was too much. I cried tears of frustration. It hurt, but not so bad that I could cry, but I was so frustrated with this injury. I had the surgery, I did the

rehab, and six months post op – I can't even jog? I walked to Harrison Hall and spoke with my athletic therapist, Jim. I choked up trying to explain how I felt the pain, and where it was. Thankfully, he is a man of few words. He treated me, and we chatted about getting the dreaded knee braces. We ordered them late last week, and they should be arriving tomorrow.

I had rugby practice last night. It was my first practice since February and my first since the ACL tear. I was wearing a brace, but not the heavy duty one. My knee was a little sore before practice, but I had asked Jim if I could practice and he informed me that I could practice until it hurt. Whoops. I had also seen the surgeon late last week after seeing Jim, and I was told by the surgeon that I could have torn my meniscus somewhere during the rehab process. GREAT. Jim thinks it is tendonitis. I have another MRI scheduled to find out what's going on, but at this point, I don't even know if I want it. Maybe I just have to accept that my playing days are over. The first years of university were my peak, and since Taylor's been gone, I haven't played the same.

I texted the coach after practice to apologize for my bad attitude.

Katie: Hey, are you free?

Coach: I'm just out with a buddy, everything okay?

Katie: I just wanted to apologize for tonight.

Coach: What for?

Katie: I had a not so great attitude. I'm a bit overwhelmed, I think. I really wanted to be better for tonight. I miss rugby, I miss the team and everyone hates me, and doing this thesis has been so hard on me. I'm not ready and I should be.

Coach: You have nothing to apologize to me for, you are just returning back to playing – and of course it is going to be tough getting back into the swing of things which can be super frustrating on its own – never mind everything else you are going through.

Katie: I'm so frustrated with everything.

Coach: The team stuff will be fixed – those girls won't be around anymore. And you would have been ready, you just had a setback. You can still train and release some of those frustrations.

Katie: Yeah, I guess.

Coach: You are still 100% one of the top athletes on the team – even on a bad day – it will take time to get back to where you were, I know it’s hard, you just have to be patient with yourself. The thesis thing, I unfortunately can’t help you with. I’m sorry.

Katie: Haha that’s okay.

Coach: So please don’t worry about me.

At practice, she had stopped a drill after I had thrown a terrible “14U” pass as she described it. She pulled me aside after she chatted with the team, and apologized to me for making it seem like she was centering me out. She said that she knows it’s my first practice back, and it’s going to take me a while to get back into it. She asked if I was okay, and I choked out through fighting tears that my knee was sore. She sent me to the sidelines. I ripped off my cleats and Megan, a student therapist said, “Your knee?” I nodded. She asked me about bracing and I told her they were ordered. I left practice with the captain, Vandy and we went out for dinner at Kelsey’s Restaurants.

So where am I now? I’m frustrated with rugby, which ironically is my outlet. My thesis is supposed to be helping me grieve and it’s causing me so much grief. Right now, I’m trying to figure it out. All of these thoughts, feelings, emotions and words and what they all mean. Everything I feel is a contradiction of itself and I do not understand any of it. How am I supposed to make sense of loss when I thrive on losing? Why would I want to understand loss when I am addicted to it? The contradiction – “Do not fear to lose what needs to be lost.” I still cannot make any sense of it.

Do you know who died yesterday? Jonah Lomu. He was a legend in the rugby world. My first exposure to rugby was in grade 7. I had grown tired of reading the giant encyclopaedia with gold pages that my mother’s late boyfriend had left me after he passed away in prison on a DUI charge. I turned on the TV and watched Jonah Lomu run over opponents AS HE WAS TRYING TO REGAIN HIS BALANCE. It was magical.

Little did I know that late autumn afternoon would turn into me asking for and receiving a rugby ball for Christmas. I idolized him, and I vowed to someday be as great as him, but I lost. I lost the desire to ever want to be that good. I lost the willpower, the strength, everything. But you know who else lost? All of his teammates. Imagine what they are going through right now. They've shared something that cannot be recreated in any other relationship. The bond that athletes share, in rugby, is a phenomenon words will never explain.

I don't feel ready to do this thesis. I feel like it's never going to be the "right" time to do it, and that's the point. It means every moment is the right moment. I just have to do it. In writing this thesis, I'm also learning that some stories don't have a clear beginning, middle and end. I think that we all get addicted to something that takes away the pain. For me, that was rugby. It was replacing emotional pain with physical pain. With this injury, I cannot do that. It's all emotional pain. I've been journaling for 45 minutes and I've had to stop four times to wipe away my tears. I'd rather be held together with tape. I'd rather be in so much pain it hurts to write. It's like I either say how I feel and fuck it up, or don't say it and let it fuck me up. Another lose-lose for me. I read today, "broken crayons still colour" and if that rings true, I am creating a masterpiece. If colour could represent emotion, I am drawing the sun setting over the French Alps in autumn. Generally, when something bad happens, you have three choices. You let it define you, you let it destroy you, or you let it strengthen you. I propose a fourth choice – you let yourself colour the world as you see it, a broken crayon among a sea of red pen.

❖ **Remembering Taylor** ❖

Open Letter to the Teammate I Lost Too Soon
Dear Taylor,

I'll never forget Training Camp 2012. If I'm being completely honest, I didn't like you. I didn't like that your natural talent far exceeded my own. I didn't like that your work ethic was more than mine had ever been. But, as I found out quickly, you were the heart of the team. When your heart stopped beating, a part of the team was forever lost.

I remember standing in my kitchen when Legs told me about your cancer. I immediately regretted that week I despised you for out-working me in training camp. I thought of all the memories I had of you, and as many as I have, it is never enough. I want the memories of you, and the team to be preserved as precious as you were. When I found out about your cancer, I withdrew further.

On April 6th, I received a Facebook Message from former assistant coach, aka Legs:

Hey badgers long time no see..

So I was talking with Michelle and reserved a spot in the annual ball tourney they have for Tay. It's usually long wknd but this year it's June 11. I want to throw a Badger team together and was looking to see who would be in. Even if you don't want to play and just want to come out. It's going to be sweet. All games played at the same park with a couple diamonds and BBQ going. Plenty of other games on the go... Day beers which could turn into night beers?

Not looking to cream everyone here so don't worry about your skill level.. But if you suck

I may cut you

heart emoticon

so ya let me know what you think.

Maybe ask a couple of the rugby boys that were close with tay?

Miss you guys and hope you're all doing great things where ever the hell you are

Legs

I replied saying that I would check in with work closer to the date, and I booked off June 11th and 12th to participate. Unfortunately, a lot of girls are busy that weekend

and can't make it. Which is too bad, it would have been really nice to see everyone. We made T shirts for the event. It says "Badgers" on the front and "TW Ruck Cancer 10" on the back. They look really nice. I get chills when I think about wearing that shirt.

I am extremely nervous for this tournament. I've never been so I don't know what to expect. Will there be a Taylor tribute? A moment of silence? Will there be speeches? I want to take this time to talk to Bill and Michelle, Taylor's parents, about my research. It is very important to me for them to know about my research and what it means to me.

Even writing this now, a few weeks before the tournament is making me emotional. I'm spending the day drinking with old teammates at a memorial tournament. Why do we have memorial tournaments? What's so special about sport and memorializing teammates? I'm not saying it's not important, I just want to know why we do it. How else do we remember our teammates? What reminds us of Taylor? How do I deal with revisiting the loss?

I'm worried about what my teammates will think. I don't want any of them to be hurt by my research. I want to have conversations with them about their experiences as well. I'm not really sure what I'm looking for here...I need to figure out what I want to know about revisiting this space of loss.

I quite often have to take breaks from journaling.

Chapter 5: Connecting Fragmented Grief

I am alive, and as I live I connect the past to my life now. Through meta-autoethnography, I piece together my fragmented experiences with grief. Ellis (2009) describes meta-autoethnographies as current reflections, narrative vignettes and analyses that ‘fast-forward’ stories to the present. Meta-autoethnographic accounts allow me to revisit my first interpretations of my story, ask the questions I didn’t ask then and include vignettes of related experiences since the death of my teammate. On meta-autoethnography, Ellis (2009) says, the “goal is to turn the narrative snapshots I have written in the past into a form more akin to a video – a text in motion – one in which I drag and drop new experiences as well as revised interpretations of old storylines, then reorder and thus restory them” (pp.12 – 13). I use meta-autoethnography to fill in the blanks; to give you, the reader a map to guide you as you navigate your interpretation of my represented story. This map will take you through my experiences as I write into the gaps left by my fragmented grief. I enter into conversations with myself that challenge me to interpret and reinterpret my original purposes. This thesis has been transforming since I began to write, and it continues to transform as I continually seek to uncover the meanings that reside in the mundane details of everyday life.

Writing as inquiry has led me to examine and re-examine my understanding of my identity and my life experiences. When I began this autoethnography in September 2015, I envisioned the final project to be an academic memorial to a teammate, because I strongly felt that as a team, and institution, we did not do enough to preserve her memory. Over the last two years, reading my way through narratives of grief and loss, I explored the relationship as knowledge that was once secret and now is not, and realized that this

project was less about what we did to serve the memory of a late teammate, but largely how as athletes, we are immersed into a culture of grief dominated by heroic underdog narratives. In my writing, the experience of a death of a teammate and how my grief manifested taught me more about how I experience grief as an athlete; how my escape became what I was running from.

We are socialized into the roles of grieving when a loved one dies. We are surrounded with language that limits our experiences. Cancer, the “C” word – what power lies in the act of naming? Through this meta-autoethnography, I offer you parts of me through research journal excerpts from November 2015 to January 2017, and I reconstruct and revise a portion of my life experiences based on my interpretation of current events.

Research Journal Excerpt

November 2, 2015

Journaling is hard. It’s hard to write when I don’t know how I’m going to approach this thesis. It would be interesting to see what my journal would look like if I just wrote everything I was thinking, the second I was thinking it, without using the backspace bar (only to correct grammar). That technique would probably generate the most honest set of emotional responses I could ever have. So I’m going to start, but first I need a topic. But I don’t know where to start, maybe the Ruck Cancer bracelet, maybe the TW patches on the jerseys, maybe Taylor’s social media accounts during her battle with cancer. Also, battle with cancer – I don’t know if I like those words yet. Battle, battle, battle – it doesn’t sound right. Okay, here I go:

I'm being interrupted by two eager sport management first year students meeting with another TA in my office. It brings back memories, though. I miss sport management, or do I? Maybe I just miss the idea of being in a specialized program. In KINE, there's no sociology of sport specialization, just Cathy. Yeah, I can't do this. Not right now. But good idea talking about the bracelet. Also – is this thesis weird? Like I'm not sure how people will respond to the idea of me talking about the death of a teammate. I'm becoming even more entrenched in this attraction I have to death. Maybe I should start seeing a counsellor. But what would I say? "My thesis is about my dead teammate, and this girl who was a teammate and friend has now become my best friend ever, because she's dead and I love dead people because I can miss them, but not have to do anything about it. Like when you miss people who are alive, you're expected to do something about it. When you miss people who are dead, it's like, "Shit, I miss ya kid, sucks to suck, I guess"". Okay, that's all I have for now. I'll make a serious attempt at flushing out an event, concept or theme later this week.

❖ **Meta-Autoethnography: Transforming the Text** ❖

The final destination of this grief journey is unclear, just as the point of departure was. It's muddy, but it's uncertain how deep. I know one thing. There is solid ground beneath me. Since I began this autoethnography in September 2015, the ground beneath me, the solid ground has shifted under my feet. I began this thesis thinking I could memorialize and pay tribute to a teammate. I wanted it to be so much about Taylor, how much I missed her, how her death had disrupted our mundane lives. But as I wrote my way through the text, and had conversations about my research with friends, family, committee members and teammates, I realized the real wounds I favoured were shaped

by the context, and not the experience. It wasn't her death that shook me. It was that she was a teammate, and sports, especially rugby taught me that I was tough, and I could overcome adversity. I was a champion and I would not be defeated.

Sport taught me so much about life, but it also allowed me to experience the world looking through rose coloured glasses. I was privileged as an athlete. I was part of an elite group of student-athletes who were tasked with representing our university against others just like us. It has been two years since I've played rugby, and I am so far removed from the rugby culture that existed on this team. It's a good thing. I needed to get out. I was asked if I had any advice for an athlete who might also grieve the loss of a teammate. At first, I didn't know what to say. I was being interviewed and I made up some bogus line about knowing where your safe spaces are, and if sport was your escape, it was okay to need to escape your escape. If a building was on fire, our instinct is to grab all the baggage we can carry and then leave. I think maybe, we should get out alive, do what we can to put the fire out, and then rebuild.

I hesitate to say that I've turned a new leaf and am now experiencing, "life after sport." I am very much still an athlete, a rugby player. I haven't retired my jersey, or hung up my cleats. The time I've spent away from rugby, away from loss (on the field and off), has allowed me to reflect on what sport means to me, in what ways sport and rugby specifically have allowed me to grow. For me to grow, I planted myself, covered myself in the darkness of grief and found my way back to the surface. Now here I am. I know where my roots are, and I know my direction.

In sport, as an athlete, I was trained to push through pain because "pain is only weakness leaving the body." As athletes, we sacrificed everything and we ignored

hardships because that is what it takes to win. The trade-off? Maybe we win a championship, but really it was about sharing experiences with teammates and other athletes. The camaraderie, knowing your team has your back. So, I ask myself again, “What happens when a teammate dies?” Years later, I don’t know the answer to that question, and if you ask me again in ten years, I still won’t know. In sport, this conversation is quiet.

Stepping away from rugby temporarily, due to injury and the death of a teammate, I was forced to rebuild and renovate my identity. What were my strengths? What did I like to do? How did I like spending my new found twenty plus hours a week now that I didn’t have practice? I had always identified as an athlete. I was the girl who was always picked second at recess. Gary and Christian were always on opposite teams, as captains, no matter what sport or game we decided to play. Whoever picked first, picked Tyler and I was always second, ahead of the boys who grew to be much taller and stronger than I was.

Being an athlete made me feel acclimatized to loss. But when that loss rattled my safe space, my escape, I was left isolated and alone. There were times when I was so full of nothingness that I couldn’t look at myself in the mirror. I couldn’t look because I didn’t see my reflection. I saw nothing. Lights were on but nobody was home. Rugby used to be my escape. It became everything I needed to escape from when Taylor died. In the years after Taylor died, who was I playing for? Was I playing for myself or for Taylor because she would never get to wear a jersey again? The pressure of playing for Taylor was overwhelming. I suffocated trying to breathe life back into the sport I loved.

Aside from my injuries, my mental health kept me from rugby. Rugby was my own personal form of therapy but when it became the very thing I needed therapy for, I let my deteriorating mental health get the better of me. As an athlete, we're viewed differently. We are strong and we are leaders. We are perceived to be tough, mentally and physically. We are expected to excel in everything we do. We are held to higher standards because we represent not only ourselves, but also our sport and our school. We are human. Of all the expectations and ways athletes are supposed to be perceived, we cannot be weak. We are not immune to other human elements. Athletes suffer from mental illness, but we suffer in the dark. We suffer in quiet locker rooms and empty gyms. We are told time and time again to focus on the drill, the only thing that matters at practice is practice, everything else can wait. How differently would athletes with mental health issues talk about it if it were visible? Can't you see it in my hollow eyes that I am not okay? Can't you see my depression surfacing like my bruises?

But I didn't ask for help. I didn't even ask my teammates how they were doing, even though I know they suffered like I do. How do you ask those questions to teammates? Maybe it's because we were conditioned, trained to say, "I'm fine" whether it's a physical or mental ailment, so we don't bother to ask. We wouldn't know how to react if someone said, "I am not okay." As athletes, we don't have days off. We can't grieve our experiences and improve our well-being. We are not immune to mental illness.

Statistically speaking, on our team of thirty-five, at least six of us will experience mental illness. At least fourteen of us will be diagnosed with cancer at some point in our lives. Nine of us will die of heart disease, and the same number will be sexually assaulted

in our lifetime. Those are only a few stats, but that number is greater than players we have on the team. But we're taught to push through it.

Conversations with the Librarian

November 18, 2015

This semester, during reading week, the library offered a drop-in clinic for grad students called "Lit Review Rescue." I thought this would be the perfect opportunity for a specialist to help me with my literature review. Especially because I can't find any literature on the athlete perspective of dealing with the death of a teammate. The workshop was structured as a one-on-one situation with a librarian. At first, a classmate was working with Elizabeth Yates, and I was working with an intern from Western University. I had shown the intern the list of articles I had compiled, over 127. But I explained to her that I couldn't find any studies or research pertaining to the death of an athlete that wasn't quantitative, or based in sport psychology. She began to search the many databases I had already searched, and was showing me articles that I had already found. Elizabeth Yates, to the rescue – I thought as she came over after finishing up with another student. Boy, was I wrong. The library intern explained to Elizabeth what I was searching for as if I wasn't there or had no idea what I was talking about. Once again, as they searched together through all the databases I had previously explored, Elizabeth showed me an article. I once again explained that I didn't want to dive into sport psychology and I was completely thrown off when she replied, "Well, why not? It seems like you would want to look into that." I stared at her blankly, and she batted her eyes while waiting for me to reply. I told her I didn't want to approach this from a psychological lens, but more so a sociological lens. She argued that a psychological lens

“makes sense for sport.” I pretended to consider her suggestion for the last ten minutes of the workshop.

After the workshop ended, I texted Cathy, my supervisor and said “Just met with Elizabeth Yates, and she thinks that maybe the sports psych route is the way to go,” to which Cathy replied:

Hells no.
Hells to the no.
She is trained in library science.
She can answer library questions only.

What a sigh of relief. We continued to chat about literature and she assured me I was on the right track. Fortunately for me, I bumped into another former professor, Lisa Kikulis, and told her what had just happened. Again, more reassurance I was on the right track. She said to me, “It’s the context that is different, not the experience.” I felt a lot better after speaking to both Cathy and Lisa.

❖ **Meta-Autoethnography: Response to the shape of my research** ❖

As this research took shape and transformed, I held onto one justification for autoethnography over any other research method. Simply put, I knew this research project would be emotionally, physically and mentally draining. I could never put any other human being in the position that I am in. I could not re-open the wounds of my teammates, or any other athlete for that matter. However, I know that there are so many stories like mine. Athletes die all the time, in all levels of sport. There are so many questions I still have surrounding the experience of the death of a teammate. Questions that would be better answered with other research methodologies. For example, how did my teammates grieve, and how are they still grieving? What does grief look like for them? Is it hanging up the cleats, or writing TW in permanent marker on your wrist to see

throughout the game? How do athletes in other sports grieve? I knew of a women's rugby player at Florida State University who died by suicide and her team decided to host a deadlifting competition and a five-mile run in her memory. Same sport, same gender, but we memorialized our athletes in different ways. What ways are appropriate or inappropriate to memorialize athletes? What social pressures or limitations do we face in memorializing athletes? How do the ways we remember athletes vary across sports, genders and cultures? Why does it matter?

But why not from a sports psychology lens? I wanted to write about the death of a teammate, and sport psychology doesn't exactly fit with autoethnography. I couldn't imagine trying to reduce my autoethnography to fit within the confines of traditional sports psychology research and theories. Laurel Richardson (2000) posits that writing is a way of knowing, a method of inquiry. Writing, for me, has reopened my wounds to explore more deeply how I make sense of my experiences, and how I find meaning in life.

In grieving the death of a teammate, I felt I had no voice. Saying Taylor's name became taboo. In September 2016, I stood in front of the Brock women's rugby team. I saw many familiar faces, but they were athletes I didn't know anymore. Every year, on the seventh of September, members of the Brock women's rugby team would march out onto the field, with balloons in hand. We would write messages in permanent marker to Taylor, and stand at centre field and release them. This year, a girl who was never on the rugby team, but was self-appointed "manager" from years previous, tasked herself with organizing the balloon release. Her and I were once close friends, but after she confessed her love for me, I withdrew myself and we were no longer friends. A few bad

relationships later, she was back. This time, I confided in her about my recent split and she became an informant for my ex. I withdrew again. A week before the anniversary of Taylor's death, I emailed the new coach, asking if there were any plans for a balloon release that there had been in previous years. She never replied to me. I spoke to the captain from the year before. She said there had been texts circulating about how the "manager" had been communicating with everyone, with the exception of me, about planning the balloon release. Text messages exchanges between the captain and "manager" went like this:

"Manager": Hey, trying to assemble girls still kicking around Brock to go release balloons for Tay on the pitch today, wanna join?

Captain: Yes please, what time?

"Manager": Just trying to figure it out. Jask has to work at 5 so as long as the other girls I've messaged are cool with it, I'm gunna say probably like 4, then we can go grab a drink after.

"Manager": I might reach out to Stef too and see if we can borrow the middle of the pitch for a few mins and if they want to join in, they can.

Captain: I work until 4 but I'll ask my sister if I can leave a half hour earlier, shouldn't be a problem.

"Manager": Ya let me just see, Crummy isn't around anymore. I'm waiting on volleyball Lauren and Mer.

Captain: Crummy's still around. She just said she was entering her sixth year of uni this year.

"Manager": Ya she's in Etobicoke now tho. She just texted back.

Captain: And I'm sure Faust would really like to be invited. I know she's not friends with very many people anymore but she was on the team that Taylor was on.

.....
Captain: Okay, so what time roughly? And what are you wearing?

"Manager": My badger shirt for sure and I'm saying like 7:15?

"Manager": I gotta get balloons too

"Manager": And also you can let Faust know that she can come but you can let her know that the entire team will be involved including Lauren, Britt and myself. I just don't want drama because this isn't what it's about.

There it is. Something I had been a part of, and so invested in, I had to seek

"permission" from someone who was NEVER on the team to attend. I've never felt so

alone in my life. I lost a teammate, and then I lost a whole team. I went from having a safety net to a bubble wand.

I arrived at the field as their rugby practice was ending. I spoke to the coaches at practice, who apologized for never replying to my emails. They said they were supportive of my research and encouraged me to say a few words to the team. I reluctantly agreed. I waited for their practice to wrap up. Players I knew and had played with, shared laughs with and spilled beers over, were ignoring me. I felt invisible and so small for the first time in my life. I was a complete outsider to this rugby team now. What used to be a window, was now a wall. The athletic director and assistant athletic director showed up while I was waiting on the sidelines. They were speaking to the team about the “Do’s and Don’ts” when it comes to representing the university. The athletic director spoke about culture and I rolled my eyes. He started his term in June and he spoke about the struggles of women’s rugby as if he knew what tensions boiled between me and the group of strangers I was facing. He spoke about how as athletes we needed to have each other’s backs and to be aware of our teammates to protect them. I felt sick.

Even those close to me are hiding things from me. Where did I go wrong? Where am I at fault? Because I dated and broke up with a player on the team and everyone chose “teams”? The guilt is overwhelming. I can already hear the whispers. Is this all in my head? I envision myself, three years ago, standing inside a circle of teammates cheering. Now, I envision the same, only my fists are up and I’m punching anyone who steps. Why am I so angry? Why can’t I let go? Why am I addicted to feeling this awful? I’m trying to prepare mentally.

I miss my teammates. I miss the way rugby used to be. I want my team back. I want Taylor to walk across the field. Her orange cleats, one foot in front of the other, one step at a time. Her pony tail bobbing. Instead, I'm looking at 35 girls who don't know me, who don't know Taylor and who she was. They don't know what 2012-2013 was like. The tears and the beers were poured out for her. Endless. There is no closure. I can't let this frustration out. I open my mouth and nothing comes out. I open my fists and there is nothing but air. It's as if Taylor's memory was an all you can eat buffet and there are not enough seats for everyone.

It was 7 PM. I was anxiously waiting for the balloons to arrive. I feel my throat tightening, and I feel my stomach sinking. I feel for the players who don't know the history. Do they need to know? Who tells them? Why? My heart is heavy.

It was all over by 7:30 PM. I stood in front of 35 girls who didn't know me, or knew me through others interpretations of me, and said a remembrance speech. The captain and "manager" didn't contribute. No one else wanted to say anything. We handed out balloons. Only certain people got orange balloons. We wrote our farewell messages and I started crying. I collapsed to my knees and I couldn't get up. I was comforted by few, and stared at by many. We made our way to centre field, we read the speech from the first balloon release for Taylor. We released the balloons. I watched them dance across the sky. My balloon didn't soar like the others. Maybe, it was weighed down by the emotional baggage I had yet to unpack and story. I watched it rise and fall in the sky like an ECG reading. Flat-lined.

Writing myself into the text was labourious, but also therapeutic. It allowed me to observe the happenings around me. I uncovered and identified other issues and questions

that floated around my headspace like balloons, cloaked in secrecy and tied down by an unwillingness to let go.

Funerals 2015-2017

November 23, 2015

I'm going to make a voice note because it's easier than trying to write right now. I'm driving home, heading back to Bruce County for Justin's funeral. And there's a lot on my mind right now. I remember the first time I buried a friend. I was eleven years old. I remember thinking at eleven that I had this wonderful life and that at eleven years old, I had done everything that I had ever wanted to do and that burying my friend at eleven years old - we did it. We were living. We had lived, and now, I'm heading back home to bury a twenty-three year old. And looking back on it now, I'm thinking the same thing now that I did when I was eleven. But I was wrong. Because at eleven, I hadn't lived. At twenty - three, we haven't lived yet either. And it's so difficult to go home for these reasons because home is a closet full of skeletons that I don't want to undress. I remember home and how everyone was so rattled that our friends were having babies so young. Eighteen, nineteen, twenty. But I think there's a much bigger issue than kids having kids, and that bigger issue is kids burying kids. We're just twenty-three. At twenty-three years old, I shouldn't have to lay my friends down. No. At twenty-three, I've buried more of my loved ones than I have celebrated birthdays. And that's all part of coming home. Home is a blackhole of loss. It's just a small town, where small town tragedies happen in a cycle, every two years, three if we're lucky. But the pain never ends. It follows you. It haunts every little piece of you. And there are so many young people in that town and there are so many of us that are coming home to these same tragedies. And there's nothing we can

do about it. Having been in the position that some of my friends have been in and knowing their struggles on a different level, that in itself is enough to know that we can't do anything about this. We made a pledge, never to let this happen again. We weren't going to let one of our friends take their own life. We weren't going to let it happen. And it's happened. I think that at this point in time, we have to realize that we can't do anything. It's not a bad thing. Maybe if I came home more often, I wouldn't always be coming home for tragedies. Maybe if I, I don't know. I don't see anything wrong at all. It's just that I feel bad for my friends who were closer to Justin than I was. Because losing a friend, a teammate, it's not a good experience. It's never something I would wish upon anyone, but I think with that, just know that it's going to happen. There are no simpler times. We've created this world that we as young adults don't want to live in anymore. So I don't blame anyone for leaving the party early. You sit through the first twenty-three minutes of a movie and you don't like it, what's the point in staying? If you sit through twenty-three years of your life and you don't see that getting any better, then what's the point in staying?

❖ Meta-Autoethnography: Coming home ❖

Over the course of my MA thesis, I had five friends and family pass away. The first was Justin. In November 2015, Justin hanged himself from a tree just outside of our old hometown. He was 23 years old. I travelled home for his funeral, and I remember how sad it was. I remembered how much I hated going home because I never went home for anything good. I found out about Justin's death over Facebook. I was writing away in my office mid morning on a Thursday. I remember it was a Thursday because our grad office was always packed on Thursday's. Another grad student, Matt, looked at me and

asked if I was okay. I turned to him and said, “My friend hung himself.” I don’t remember much after that. I walked out of the office, and wandered aimlessly around the school. I found myself in another grad office, with sport management grad students. A comfortable familiarity. I sat down and told Lindsay and Cole what had happened. They offered their support, but I wasn’t interested. Mitch entered the grad office. I don’t know after how long, and I told him as well. I went to meet with Lisa Kikulis, a sport management professor and committee member. I had so many questions but I struggle to remember what they were.

How do I separate the grief I feel for Justin from the grief I experienced when Taylor died? Is my thesis ruined or is this grief a painful reminder that grief doesn’t go away. It is cyclical, and seasonal and only goes away long enough to forget it’s there for a split second.

The next funerals happened within days of each other in June 2016. First, Joey overdosed on heroin (undetermined whether or not it was a suicide), next, Brady lost his life in a farm accident, and then my great aunt Dot died of natural causes a week before her 95th birthday. Again, I travelled home for the funerals. They were spread over five days. I couldn’t bring myself to go to the first two. I selfishly didn’t want to see so many sad eyes on faces I knew to be happy. The two twenty-two year olds were friends and buried within days of each other. I called a friend late one night between funerals. Hillary came over at 10 PM, no questions asked, with dumbbells and slam balls. We ran ourselves into the ground. We worked out so hard we couldn’t tell if our bodies or our eyes were crying. We collapsed onto my front yard and when we caught our breath, we talked life and death. As much of it as we understood at twenty-four years old.

My great aunt Dot's funeral was similar to my grandfather's, her brother's. We gathered as a small group in a small funeral home. Family gatherings, no matter the occasion are always rife with familial drama. This funeral was no exception. Between my sister and her boyfriend showing up late and leaving early, to my father's girlfriend of 5 months playing the grieving niece card, there was never a dull moment. I stood alongside family members; siblings, nieces and nephews, as everyone who entered shared the phrases, "I'm sorry for your loss" and "My condolences" to each and every one of us and they reached out to touch our hands. I stick out like a sore thumb in my family. I'm the only one with red hair, so naturally, it's the first thing anyone over the age of forty comments on. A friend of my grandmother's spoke to me and said, "I remember you. I remember your hair. Now, the last time I saw you was at your grandfather's funeral and back then you were just heading off to school. Now here we are again, where are you now?" I immediately flashed back to a conversation I had with my youngest brother, Ryan. He told me that he overheard Granny say to our dad that she was worried about me dying like an "Old Widow" because I couldn't keep my nose out of a book long enough to grab anyone's attention. (Would it be that bad?). I returned to conversation with this woman and said, "Just a few years left," as I smiled, instead of telling her that I'm working on a research project that really has no end. It was then that I realized I would never have the answers to the questions I have, and as Granny predicted, I'm likely going to spend my life chasing this unquenchable thirst for knowledge and die like an Old Widow.

The last funeral I attended was in February 2017. My aunt had passed away from ovarian and cervical cancer at the age of 49. Cancer, again. Between cancer, suicide and

accidents, I think I've been to maybe two funerals that were not because of those. I spent November through January commuting between St Catharines and Midland, to the hospital where my aunt lived her final few months. I sat alongside Ryan, my twin cousins Tina and Felicia and my uncle Bob through those months. None of us really said much ever. But before my aunt's condition deteriorated too much, she reminded me that I'm "too smart for my own good," and I should leave school and "get a real job." I didn't have a rebuttal, (which I was known for – challenging established norms without knowing that's what I was doing), so I sat and smiled. She took a few stabs at Ryan too. He gets it from everyone – "So, you're a man. Do you have a girlfriend yet?" He shook his head no, and said with his career in power engineering, he wouldn't find a girlfriend that didn't want only his money. He had a point, I guess. He just celebrated his 20th birthday and makes more money than I do as a teaching assistant.

We sat in that same room, 140, and watched as aunt Ruth deteriorated. We watched as her eyes sank deeper and the spaces between her ribs grew wider with every meal she couldn't keep down. We finally got the call that she had passed away. I was working out at the gym, with my brand new Fitbit, a nifty fitness tracking accessory. I was in the middle of a boot camp workout when my wrist began to vibrate violently. I had a text from Tina – not unusual. A text from my estranged mother – worrisome. And finally, a missed call from my brother. I ended my workout to check my phone. Ruth had died a few hours earlier. Ryan and I packed our bags and headed back up to Midland. Again, the funeral was rife with drama. Of her nine siblings, my aunt had only three in attendance. She requested that the rest didn't show, and if they did, they were to be turned

away at the door. My mind races as to know what would have happened if any of my other aunts and uncles had showed up.

My experiences will grief happen all the time, but of these five other funerals I've attended in the last two years, none of them felt the way Taylor's funeral did. For these other funerals, I had another safe space – CrossFit St. Catharines (CFSTC). This is where I worked out, and became employed (volunteered for a free membership) six months later. When I was grieving my personal losses, I had CFSTC to escape to. I could lose myself lifting double my body weight, listening to music so loud I will be deafening in a few short years. I didn't have that when Taylor died because rugby was my out. When Taylor died, I felt numb but how painful is it to feel nothing at all? The emptiness poured out of me like a boiling pot. The nothingness I felt took up so much mental and physical space. I've learned that everyone deals with unimaginable pain and loss in their own way, and we're entitled to that, without judgment. I've also learned that people, like oceans, have vast boundaries, and whilst they sit quietly, looking like a calm ocean on a sunny day, somewhere, in the same ocean, there is a storm.

Silence speaks when words cannot

December 14, 2015

It's been a while since I've journaled. I was hoping it would get easier as I continued to journal, but it hasn't really. A lot has happened in the last month. I spent a week at home after a friend from public school hung himself in a tree on the outskirts of town. I handled it well, I guess, as per my own definition of "handling it well." I didn't cry very much. Choked up a bit explaining what happened to a friend, but that was all. Sometimes I think that perhaps our eyes need to be washed by our tears once in awhile,

so that we can see life with a clearer view again. But for me, crying isn't a way to grieve. Waterworks become nothing more than a spectacle of acceptable grieving processes. On the drive home, I took a voice memo, and I will transcribe it at a later time. I'm not ready to dive into that.

My thesis is starting to take shape. I'm presenting at the MacIntosh Conference in January. I'm nervous, very nervous. I've presented once before, but it didn't seem to be as daunting as this. I'm in the process now of flushing out a chapter three and one, but I don't think I will be writing my thesis in the traditional chapters 1 to 5 format. I read an autoethnography yesterday that read like the script of a play. Interesting, but also something I don't think fits. Maybe a playbook, but how? Also, I think as soon as we figure out how I'm going to write, I'm going to start auditing my journal. It needs to happen soon I think. No heroic narrative. This is perfect. I've hated heroes my whole life, and I think that's because I wanted to be one, or because I can't save everybody.

I think it's time to really dive into this project. I've been hesitant because I don't want to narrow my thinking too far just yet. Sometimes I wonder why I chose to do this, especially because I'm opting out of the heroic narrative. Maybe it will help me, and a few other people who think like me. You don't need a reason to help people.

In my latest "book club" meeting with Cathy, she mentioned, aka insisted that I seek grief counselling while continuing with this project. I only agreed because I could use it as data in my thesis. Later that night, a friend and I were talking about it again when she broke down and cried. She wakes up every single day terrified that today might be the day I decide I've prepared everyone enough for my death. I told her a while ago after Justin's suicide that I think the purpose of life, and the purpose of relationships are

to provide the living with the memories they need of you when you're gone. It isn't about accomplishing dreams, desires or anything like that. It's simply just preparing everyone else for the day you die in forms of conversations held, moments together and smiles captured. I've been planning my funeral for years now. A friend has the specifics of it all. I told her over a year ago. Now, no one is ready for me to leave yet, so I'm not going anywhere. (That's a little disclaimer I feel I have to put, just because people aren't as open with death as I am). I'm very open to death. Death is not foreign to me.

In writing this journal today though, I miss those in my life who have past. Maybe that's why I'm so determined to live my life in a way that leaves everyone else around me prepared for my death. I don't want anyone to miss me.

I haven't talked yet about what I did after I heard the news of Justin's passing. I went to Dr. Kikilus' office and told her my whole project was ruined because this new death has influenced how I felt about Taylor's. We talked, and I realized that maybe it did influence how I felt, but everything did. It's important to acknowledge – I AM A SPONGE. Sucking knowledge from my surroundings, only feeling complete when I am completely immersed in knowledge until it seeps from my pores. Complete saturation.

❖ **Meta-Autoethnography: Resistance to death's openness** ❖

My proximity to death leaves me with overwhelming envy of my friends and family who have died. I want to die. I want to exist only in memories. I often wonder how much I do exist in other people's lives. I wonder how many stories I've been a part of. Do I exist in the minds of people I don't speak to anymore? What do people remember of me? Will my absence mean as much or as little as my presence?

I am suicidal. I mean that in a way that expresses my feelings of suicide. I am safe and I have no plans to harm myself and I have not devised any elaborate plans to stage a suicidal ideation performance. There's a difference between feeling suicidal and suicidal ideations. It's not that black and white. I exist in the gray areas between and often times, on the brightest days of my life, I can look up and see a dark hovering cloud of suicidal feelings above me.

When I'm daydreaming, it's often about my own death. How is it going to happen? Cancer? Likely. An accident? Probable. Suicide? More than plausible. How will me family find out? Where will they be? How will they react? What would they have wished they had said to me, or didn't say to me? Will they feel guilt? I'm quickly distracted by these questions, but I rationalize and say to myself that I will never have to worry about the answers to those questions because when those questions are posed, I won't be around to worry about the answers.

So here I am, questioning my mental health. Some days, I would say I am not mentally well, and other days, I wouldn't question myself. It's a constant itch I can't scratch. Why do I live my life this way? Is it because I am so fascinated with death? Why do I love the idea of dying so much? Why is it that I feel most alive when others die? Am I sick? Is this sickness terminal? Is anything not terminal?

MacIntosh Conference 2016

January 25, 2016

I haven't written in my journal in a while so, I figured I would try a voice note again. I had the MacIntosh Presentation on January 16th. I presented second and I was nervous for the presentation, and felt a lot of pressure because it was my first presentation

in front of Cathy. Mitch and LK were there, Ty. A lot of great presenters and a lot of people I care about, and care about their opinion of me. So I presented second and when I went to read the poem I had written, I was crying by the second line. It took a while to get through it and then once it was finished, I took a deep breath and finished the rest of my presentation. Everyone said it went well. I don't feel like it did at all. Besides embarrassing myself and crying in front of everyone, I feel like my presentation skills aren't where they need to be at a university level, at an academic conference. So that was intimidating and the questioning left me very vulnerable, I feel. I felt like I was being attacked when I wasn't, I was just really defensive and wanted to have an answer for everything, instead of acknowledging that I don't have the answer. It was an experience, now, thinking back on it - it wasn't that bad. But at the time, it was awful. I immediately after wanted to switch my thesis topic and then I followed that up with wanting to drop out of grad school entirely. Presentations aren't for me. But then I figured I wasn't going to let a couple presentations stand in the way of a degree. I really like research and I really don't know how important my research is, but I think that I've come this far and it's too late now to turn around. I want my supervisor to be proud of me, and proud of the work I'm putting out. I'm really struggling this semester and if I can get through this semester, I think I'll be okay. It's just I feel completely like an outsider in my own head when I'm in a class where people are so much more in tune with everything we are talking about. Cathy said it was my fear of not being the best paralyzing me and she's right. And she's right, I know I didn't admit it at the time, but I know she's right. So it's hard to perform well when I feel all of this vulnerability. Looking at it now, I've got nine weeks left and that's one presentation and two papers. So hopefully, I can get through

those and do it well enough that I can make Cathy proud and I guess make myself proud. Even though I think my standards are too high for me to ever be proud of myself. I set this bar when I was younger saying that I never ever wanted to reach my full potential because I wanted my full potential to continually be better, set the bar higher every time. So it's like I never want to reach a goal, because if I reach it, it's too low. I guess I have a problem with self-recognition.

❖ **Meta-Autoethnography: First accounts of Academic Presentation** ❖

I've presented my thesis five times in the last two years. First, at the MacIntosh Conference at Queen's University, and then at Mapping New Knowledges Conference at Brock University. A few months after that I defended my thesis proposal and most recently, I competed at Brock University's 3MT (Three Minute Thesis) Competition. Overall, my research was well received, with many encouraging comments about embracing my emotionality (I cried in every presentation). As I slowly begin to become more comfortable with public speaking and presenting my research, I am becoming less and less sure of myself as an academic. I've discovered that the more I know, the less I know. For every question I devise and answer to, I have two more questions. Is this academia? Is this what the rest of my life is going to feel like? A constant feeling of never knowing anything except that there is always more to know.

The end is near

February 8, 2016

It's been almost 2 months since I've written anything. I'm not really sure why. I've been thinking lots, about the project, about ethics, about my audience. Audience. This is my stumbling point. I don't know who this is for anymore, and I don't think I

really did. What can this story do for other people? Will it be just another story of another athlete dying young?

I'm starting to think that my distaste for anything rugby or sport related is because of this thesis. I hate rugby. I hate thinking about this, all the time.

February 10th, 2016

I was thinking on my way to school today. I need two journals. I need one for everyday life, and I need a research journal. Right now, the two are blended and it will be very, very messy trying to analyze this.

I went out for dinner with Cathy last night. I asked about my thesis proposal, and how early I could get it done. She said if my literature review draft was good that I could be proposing as early as the end of March. I definitely think it is realistic. I asked her, "So what do I do after that, write for the whole summer?" Cathy replied, "Yeah, if you want to finish super early." This struck me.

Am I working too fast? Am I desperately trying to finish this thesis as soon as possible simply because I have no deadlines? I don't know. More importantly, how will I know when I'm finished? There is no closure. There is no saturation.

I am struggling with this thesis. I don't know why I am doing it. I feel like I have nothing to say. Nothing that hasn't been said, or no place to say what I want to.

I feel like I am okay with words. I can craft them into something powerful. Maybe I will be okay with spoken word. It's not something that comes natural to me though. I would have to work so hard, or be so damaged to be able to write anything like that. I

don't know if I want to take that plunge, to be drowning in unknown emotions that will fill my lungs, and I sink.

I'm lost in a constant state of not knowing – is this called learning? Am I going to look back on this and wonder how I felt so lost when I was really on the right path the whole time.

❖ Meta-Autoethnography: Writing as Inquiry ❖

As I write my way into and through the text, I get tangled in a web trying to make sense of not knowing. I am navigating the text as best I can, trying to find meaning in the mundane details of life. As I write, I am exploring relationships between knowledge and new knowledge through interpretations of the stories I tell. Ellis (2009) explains:

We tell stories so that others might know more about us, what has happened to us and the things we care about. But stories are not only a way of telling about the events, people and emotions in our lives. We also tell stories to fashion our identities. We tell stories as a way to relate to other human beings. We tell stories to find meaning in and understand human experience because, as Richardson [1990, p.65] says, 'It is the only way humans understand their own lives' (p. 165).

As I write, I learn more about how I experience life and I understand the way that I should tell these stories. "By getting a handle on the collective stories we receive from our culture, families and peers, we can understand better our own individual stories and how they are intertwined with others" (Ellis, 2009, p .165). As we tell stories, our interpretations of the story and of the experience change. Ellis (2009) points out that,

Telling our stories provides an avenue for changing what they mean to us. It's also important that we listen closely to the stories of others. In listening, we learn to think 'with' a story, which means to take on the story, live in it, and experience it affecting one's own life. It means, as Frank [1995, p.23] says, 'to find in that [story] a certain truth of one's own life.' In seeing our lives in the lives of others we open up new possibilities for living (p.189).

By telling and retelling our stories, we can reframe our lives and our experiences in ways that are easier to digest. We come to know ourselves and our stories in new ways as the context and the time in which our stories are told change throughout the history and life experience of the person who tells.

Hello, it's me

March 13, 2016

I opened my online journal to see that I had another unfinished post. It was left unfinished because I do not want to forcefully write. I write best when I'm angry and lucky for me, that happens quite often.

I am having trouble writing. I was really upset about an hour ago.

I don't feel like I am part of a team and that's a feeling I am not comfortable with. I grew up with athletics, and now, athletics has outgrown me.

If only I had known what it would be like now – maybe I would have tried a little harder then.

I'm struggling trying to put this all into words but it's difficult to explain what it is like to lose. Losing a sport, a team, a teammate is not like losing anything else. I'm lost exploring all of the "what ifs" and the "if onlys." It hasn't been an easy transition, and that's really all it is. Just a transition, and I have transitioned many times before.

I wish I could write a letter to myself. That seems to be trendy these days.

"An Open Letter To The Athlete I Used To Be."

No, that sounds too....much like I am only an athlete. I am more than that. I am.

I am in grad school trying to separate my athletic identity from this new identity I have constructed through my transitions. But how?

I am realizing now that I don't have a safe zone. I don't have anything that makes me feel like me anymore. How pathetic. Writing this, none of this feels right.

Maybe that's because this isn't about rugby. It never was. Rugby was just a way to fill a hole. I wish that I knew more about myself. I guess that is what this writing is trying to do. To help me figure out who I am, before I was told who to be.

Okay, fuck this.

I am tired.

Who the fuck made me hate myself this much? Who the fuck made me hate the face I see in the mirror? Me. That was me. I did that.

It's time for me to be honest with myself.

Katie, you are a smart, smart girl with a broken mind.

I have so many questions. In doing this research, I have started to think a lot about death. I guess not anymore than usual, because I think about death a lot. My own, mostly. In reading about the memorials, visitations and funerals of others, I often think of my own. I think about what I want to have at my funeral, what songs I want to be played, how I want the whole thing to be orchestrated. But really, all of that stuff is for the living, which is what I would not be. I have decided that my vision of life is to prepare the people in my life for my inevitable departure. Honestly, I believe that is all life is. Life and living is just making and breaking connections in preparation to leave this earth. Why can't anyone else see that? Or maybe they do, but they are still so desperately scared of what happens after death? Why scared? I am excited, I can hardly wait. I can't wait to experience death. After all, you only die once. You live every single day. Living is mundane.

Don't be so angry, Katie. Life doesn't owe you a specific amount of time.

I don't want to do this project anymore. I don't want to write about the rugby team. I don't want to write about Taylor. Who am I to tell that story? I guess I'm telling my own story, but I don't want to include anyone else in my story. My story is my own, and I don't owe it to anyone to tell it. I don't know if I should be writing this. Maybe my thesis isn't worth pursuing.

I crawled into bed at 1:27 am.

I was asked what I was writing about.

I was then asked if I had thought about playing again. My response:

"Of course I have. I think about it all the time. And then I convince myself it isn't a good idea. I say it's because of my body, but I don't think that is it. If I were to use a tasteless metaphor, I would suggest that rugby is to me what cancer was to Taylor. A toxin. A poison that took her life. A rejected transfusion. I do not belong anymore. Rugby culture has chewed me up and spit me out."

❖ Meta-Autoethnography: Expressing anger ❖

I can't fathom why I was so angry. Grief does weird things to the mind. I think as I've learned to acknowledge death, I've opened myself to what Riggs (2014) explains as the story that resides, "between the now of possibility and the then of certainty" (p. 378). I'm trying to keep my head above water while my writing is flooded with questions about the uncertainty of death. I am also uncertain as to whether or not I have moved past that anger. Sure, sometimes I am at peace with death, but it always seems to be grief that stirs me. Grief is a blanket I've pulled over my head, but it won't let me sleep. How can I find meaning through the grief I have experienced and embodied?

As my right ACL injury has healed and I have become stronger, I am ready to return to rugby physically. I question whether or not I am ready mentally. If I return to

rugby, I will not be playing for Brock. I will be playing for the University of Toronto Varsity Blues. How will playing for a new team affect my already seemingly fragile athletic identity? Will it unsettle old feelings about Brock University and how the team and athletic department handled Taylor's death? The first game Brock played after Taylor passed away was against the University of Toronto. Is playing for the University of Toronto one more way I stay attached to Taylor? Will there be an impending identity crisis if Brock and the University of Toronto play each other? All of these questions suffocate me. Can I wear a jersey without the TW patch? Rugby used to be a lifeline, but I question whether or not it has become a noose, getting tighter and tighter as rugby season approaches.

TW Memorial Softball Tournament

June 11, 2016

I'm on my way to Taylor's memorial softball tournament. Some background on the tournament. We entered a Badgers team, and we've invited everybody over the last four seasons, mostly 2012 and 2013 teams, the team that played with Taylor and the year Taylor passed away to play with us and we've had a couple girls drop out and a couple girls who would only come if we were staying the night. I can't say definitively, but I would speculate that those girls would only come expecting that we would get very drunk tonight and stay the night. These are also the same girls who won't do any of the memorial things we have done for Taylor in the last few years. We play our first game at 11, round robin style, and then after lunch, the teams are seeded and if you win your afternoon games, you move on to the finals for the top two teams in each pool basically. I think overall my thoughts about today are very all over the place, that's the best way I can

say it. I'm excited to see teammates, but I'm also realizing that it's becoming a thing where I'm only seeing these teammates when it is a memorial for Taylor. It's very similar to my situation in my hometown, where all my closer hometown friends, I only ever see them when I'm at some sort of funeral. So it makes it challenging to spend that time with them. It's really only the shitty things in life that are bringing us together. I'm excited that it's a softball tournament, definitely, it's one of those sports where any athlete can play softball. Mind you, not competitively, but any athlete can play slo pitch softball and have a good time. We're missing the opening ceremonies. They start around 8 and I don't know if they're having an opening ceremony or what they're doing, I'm not sure what any...I'm not sure what the day is looking like to be honest. I think it's in typical Brock Women's Rugby fashion to do the least amount of work possible. We just show up for the games and then leave, but I'm excited to see Bill and Michelle and today is a good day to tell them about my research and what I'm hoping to get out of this tournament. I don't really know what that is right now, but I have two and a half hours to figure it out. But I don't know how to bring it up, I don't know how to bring it up to my teammates. I'm scared, frankly, of their reactions. What am I going to do if they think it's stupid? What if they think it's not my story to tell? How is that going to impact the rest of the day, the games? I'm nervous that I'm not going to get the whole experience down, in writing, so, I brought my phone for voice memos, and I have a notebook for notes. I'm going to keep this notebook around all the time and I'm going to write in it as often as I feel the need to keep it close to me at all times and whenever I have any sort of thought I can write it down and not worry about waiting to get to a computer to write down everything. I cried twice on the drive so far, and I've been on the road for an hour. I think it's really, I'm not going to

say difficult again, but going back and visiting these places and these spaces where people are only getting together because of a loss is uh, it's a weird concept. But does that mirror rugby culture in any sense? Win or lose, you hit the booze? Smash the shit out of each other for 80 minutes and then buy your opposite number a beer? Is that what we're doing? We're going for beers? Taylor's 80 minutes are up. So this is our beer up.

Welcome to my funeral

October 11, 2016

It's been a while. Which seems to be a recurring theme... I can't stay here too long or I risk not getting out alive. And I mean that. When I first embarked on this thesis I thought this would be a tribute to Taylor, a way to memorialize her forever. But I was wrong. This thesis has morphed itself into my experiences within a culture of grief that I am resistant to. This has become so much about my own mental health, or lack thereof.

A lot of entries from my research journal previously are unfinished. Whatever I was thinking at the time was too much for me to finish writing. What does that mean? Why am I unable to finish these thoughts? Why is it so laborious to simply remember? Why can I not revisit these spaces of loss without wanting to join Taylor?

I've become increasingly self-aware. I would maybe go so far as to say I have high emotional intelligence. Trust me when I tell you that emotional intelligence is a scary thing. When you are aware of how often you actually don't want to be alive, it is terrifying. I've never been so close to death. I think about dying all the time.

When I think about death, I think about how people will remember me. I have a FOMO [Fear Of Missing Out] already of my own damn funeral. I can't wait for it. Funerals are like the grand finale of our lives, only there's no encore. I have been

planning my funeral for as long as I can remember. What weddings are to other people is what my funeral is to me. I've been dreaming about it since I was a little girl. Six years old, to be exact.

Donate everything salvageable from my lifeless body. With what is left, I want my body to be cremated, with my ashes planted with the seeds of a Red Maple tree in the middle of a field. Care for the tree as if it embodied my entire existence. Have an outdoor funeral, with an open bar. Build a bonfire, as big as you can. Have everyone write down everything they hated about me and burn it – let it go. Hire a videographer and capture the entire funeral on film. Do not shy away from emotion.

For next time, I need to sit down and write more about my experiences of losing a teammate, rather than planning my funeral.

January 31, 2017

I'm in a dark place.

I'm lingering in the dark spaces of gray areas. I am suicidal, and I have been since I was six years old. By suicidal I mean that I do not care if I live or die, however, I do not have any suicidal ideations. I'm not elaborating planning how I will take my life. I'm just existing, and I'm neither content nor upset about it. I am existing.

My aunt passed away yesterday. Cancer. I am strangely not upset about it. I have not yet shed a tear.

Cancer didn't affect me the same way it did when Taylor passed away. Cancer is so tightly intertwined with my athletic identity. Death by cancer is only bad when it

infects a team. I would probably say the same about any cause of death when it infects a team, whether it's a car accident, or suicide.

❖ Meta-Autoethnography: Putting on a new jersey ❖

This autoethnographic project provided an avenue for me to tell my story about the death of a teammate. Through writing, I found I had a story worth telling, a story that could stand alone, yet connect to other stories of loss. This encouraged me to open myself up evocatively, and explore my losses to better understand and appreciate who I am and the experiences I've had. In undertaking this research, I learned autoethnography is not about fixing a problem or coming to terms with loss, which is what I had initially sought to do. I understand now, that by gaining insights about myself and others I can find a way to exist in a world that I can live in.

Having completed this autoethnography now, it is unclear where it begins and where it ends. There are no tidy boundaries to this project, no final destination but rather a journey of self-discovery. The purpose of this journey was to provide a framework to hold my experiences in place, to contextualize my interpretation of my experiences in a short moment. A turning point in my journey was realizing that, like Ellis (2009), the story I was telling was “constructed from my current position, one that is always partial, incomplete and full of silences, and told at a particular time, for a particular purpose, to a particular audience” (p. 13). Accepting partial and incomplete stories and embracing the silence moments of the grieving experience was imperative to deepening my understanding.

“To story ourselves does not mean to describe the way it “really” happened; instead it means to “seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger”

(Benjamin, 1968, p.257 as cited in Ellis, 2009). I reinterpreted my experiences as a series of emotions, journals and stories, and as I produced my autoethnography, my re-experience of what happened was adapted. As Ellis (2009) did, I also became

less concerned with “historical truth” and more involved with “narrative truth,” which Spence, (1982, p.28) described as “the criterion we use to decide when a certain experience has been captured to our satisfaction.” It is “what we have in mind when we say that such and such is a good story, that a given explanation carries conviction, that one solution to a mystery must be true” (p. 107)

As I conclude my autoethnography, I have lived through experiencing simultaneously the culture of grief intersecting the culture of sport. This influenced how I tell my story because to better understand my individual stories, I need to first understand how they intertwine and intersect with the stories of others who are also experiencing the culture of grief. “Writing privileges one version of a story, but memories of untold details and alternate story lines still linger” (Ellis, 2009, p.117). As I continue on my grief journey, I negotiate and re-negotiate the meanings I have constructed in my experiences. I will continue to do that as I venture through life and navigate the texts, searching to find balance between writing lives and writing loss.

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